

“Arrival”--ABBA (1976)

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Essay by Carl Magnus Palm (guest post)*



ABBA

After three albums of gradually finding out who they are and what they do best, ABBA’s fourth album, “Arrival” is, arguably, the album where they truly came into their own. Here, the focus is 100 percent on their strengths: with the female half as lead singers on almost all the tracks, multi-layered choirs, and meticulously arranged and fretted-over pure pop songs throughout an entire album, virtually every track could have been a successful single A-side. And, indeed, this was the album that spawned ABBA’s most famous song, “Dancing Queen,” as well as hit singles such as “Money, Money, Money” and “Knowing Me, Knowing You.”

Formed in 1972--as the rather unwieldy Björn & Benny, Agnetha & Anni-Frid--the four members of the group were already well-known performers in their home-country of Sweden, some of them having been among the nation’s biggest stars in the 1960s. Their formation happened organically: Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus met in 1966, while they were both out on tour with their respective groups--the Hep Stars and the Hootenanny Singers--and soon began writing songs together. Three years later, in 1969, Benny struck up a romantic relationship with Anni-Frid Lyngstad, better known simply as Frida, while Björn fell in love with Agnetha Fältskog.

The four of them were all busy with their separate careers, so at first no one was really discussing working together as a group. However, after a few false starts, in 1972 they recorded their first English-language pop single, “People Need Love.” It was just an experiment to find out if there was any potential in their collaboration--it turned out that there was: the song became a sizable hit in Sweden and they decided to extend the experiment by recording an album together, leading to even greater domestic success.

At the time, it was an almost unimaginable dream for a Swedish band to be accepted outside Scandinavia, but ABBA were fortunate to have a manager by the name of Stig Anderson, a seasoned music industry veteran who refused to believe that his protégés shouldn’t be able to have global hits. After many setbacks, he was finally proven right in 1974, when the group triumphed in the Eurovision Song Contest with “Waterloo.” A massive international

breakthrough followed: after ABBA had been signed with Atlantic Records, the song even hit number six in the United States, where Eurovision didn't mean a thing at the time.

By August 1975, the group was ready to start recording its fourth album, kicking off sessions with a bang: the first song to be recorded was "Dancing Queen," the most famous track from the album and, today, ABBA's signature song. Benny and Björn were both huge fans of artists such as Stevie Wonder, but, being Swedes brought up on "square" European hit music, found it hard to tap into African-American rhythms. So, to find the right groove for their new song, they took a listen to George McCrae's 1974 US number one "Rock Your Baby"--not to copy it exactly, but to see if they could pinch a trick or two of it to make their own recording more dance-friendly. It worked, and ABBA found themselves with what has since been hailed as one of the greatest pop singles ever made. Their famed perfectionism meant that they would fiddle with it for several months before it was regarded as finished, removing sections, and even re-editing the song so that its third and fourth verses became its opening verses. Upon release in August 1976, a year after recording had begun, "Dancing Queen" shot to number one most everywhere on the planet, eventually giving ABBA their only US number one in April 1977, enticing people out on the dance floor ever since.

After starting work on "Dancing Queen" in the summer of 1975--along with non-album single "Fernando"--sessions ground to a halt for several months, as the group had to deal with a sudden demand for their presence both in Europe and the US, promoting singles such as "Mamma Mia" and "SOS." Their most famous journey during this period was to Australia where they had become a success of unimaginable proportions, breaking all previous sales records, and setting off the phenomenon known as Abbamania. It wasn't until March 1976 that ABBA finally had the time to go back into the studio to continue work on their album; sessions would continue for six months, exclusively at Stockholm's top recording facility at the time, Metronome Studio.

The first song to be recorded during the 1976 sessions was another of the group's all-time classics, the soft-rock masterpiece "Knowing Me, Knowing You", the first of what would turn out to be a string of divorce-themed classics. With Frida on lead vocals, the song spoke of empty rooms where children used to play, making it clear that the song was about adults and the break-up of a family; as The Who's Pete Townshend pointed out in reference to "Knowing Me, Knowing You," "Abba was one of the first big, international bands to actually deal with sort of middle-aged problems in their songwriting." Although the song was written and recorded way before the romantic couples in ABBA had broken up, it has since become entwined with that aspect of the group's story, where their real-life marital splits inevitably colored some of their later songs, such as "The Winner Takes It All" and "When All Is Said And Done."

Most of "Arrival," however, was just an explosion of the best and most colorful pop music that the mid-1970s had to offer. Modelling themselves on the Beatles, ABBA aspired to a sense of variation on their albums, and "Arrival" certainly offered it: from the throwback to innocent 1960s girl-group sounds in the ridiculously joyful opening track "When I Kissed The Teacher," to heartbreak ballads such as the Agnetha-sung "My Love, My Life," the Weimar cabaret-inflected "Money, Money, Money," the pop-rock of "Tiger," and the folk-influenced, fiddle-heavy title track, the album was a smorgasbord of expertly produced pop. The main session musicians on the album--guitarists Janne Schaffer and Lasse Wellander; bassist Rutger

Gunnarsson and Mike Watson; drummers Ola Brunkert and Roger Palm--were all Swedish but of international caliber, contributing arrangement ideas and helping Agnetha, Björn, Benny and Frida realizing their dream of producing pop music that sounded just as good as what was produced in the US and the UK. Perhaps even more important was sound engineer, Michael B. Tretow, who was ABBA's collaborator and unofficial co-producer on all their classic albums; Michael was a constant source of ideas and just as keen as the group to make recordings that could compete with the best in the international market.

The 1970s was a time when overt seriousness--both in image and in musical expression--was often regarded as trumping most other concerns, so the kind of straightforward pop ABBA produced wasn't always welcomed with open arms by reviewers. But even at that time there were those who were astute enough to recognize the qualities of "Arrival." As Robert Hilburn of the "Los Angeles Times" wrote in his assessment of the album, "Writer-producer-singers Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus know enough about the value of pop sentimentality, strong melodic hooks and luring female voices to disarm even the toughest detractors."

Carl Magnus Palm is the leading authority on ABBA. He is the author of nine books about the group, and has contributed to innumerable radio and television programmes about them. He lives in Stockholm, Sweden.

**The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*