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This page:
Australia's Björn Again playing live

Facing page, top, and previous page:
Revival, voted top ABBA tribute act by the Agents Association Of Great Britain, since 2013

Facing page, bottom:
The Original Band, left to right – Lasse Wellander (guitar), Roger Palm (drums/percussion), Mikael Areklev (guitar), Mike Watson (bass), Åke Sundqvist (drums/percussion), Johan Stengård (sax) and Owe Sandström (ABBA's original designer

I blame Matthew Kelly, myself. *Stars In Their Eyes* spawned a nation of doppelgängers, ordinary folk transformed – with the aid of cosmetics and costumes – into their idols. Of course, the ability to sound vaguely like the person you were imitating was a prerequisite of the television series – a criterion not always deemed so important by many of those who make a reasonable living on the tribute act circuit.

And it is a lucrative circuit, especially at a time when we're having to be more prudent with our pennies. Affording ticket prices to see Lady Gaga, Madonna or Coldplay in concert is a pricey business, so the cut-price impersonator is often the next best thing. Mind you, be prepared for a considerable suspension of belief in the presence of Maybe Gaga, Madonna By Knight and, ahem, Coldplace.

The same suspension of belief isn't wholly necessary when it comes to the veritable small industry of ABBA tribute acts. Let's face it, many of them bear as much resemblance to Benny, Björn, Agnetha and Frida as this writer does to Beyoncé. But that's part of the gig. The sillier they look, the better, really. Nor does their vocal homage have to be note-perfect – a decent karaoke ABBA usually suffices. You see, when it comes to the Swedish Fab Four's mimics, it's all about the songs, whether or not Agnetha is played by a former nun who has swapped her tweed twinset for figure-hugging gold spandex. And the same songs are performed with as much (if not more) gusto by the audience – replete with dance moves – as they are by the performers.

Mind you, the musicianship required to nail these songs live is in the upper reaches. They may sound simple, but they're not simply constructed. As composers, Benny and Björn had lofty aspirations. "There is a surprising amount of freedom to improvise within the framework of ABBA songs," says John Reilly of Revival, voted top ABBA tribute act by the Agents Association Of Great Britain each year since 2013.

"Part of the genius of their music is the fact that you can play around with the structure and give it your own stamp. The key elements of the song are still present, but we can increase or lower the tempo, make the guitars heavier and generally give the sound a more raw live feel. ABBA also did this in their live performances."

The Original Band, out of Sweden, comprises musicians who have recorded and performed with ABBA, among them Mike Watson, Åke Sundkvist, Johan Stengård, Per Lindvall, Mikael Areklev, Roger Palm and Lasse Wellander (the late Rutger Gunnarsson passed away last year), as well as ABBA's original designer, Owe Sandström. According to Stengård, he and his colleagues "created their own playing on the recordings, the bass and guitar lines, the drum grooves. You know, there was never any written music in the studio."

This association with ABBA is what Stengård believes gives The Original Band an edge over the competition. "It is one thing to play an ABBA song. It's a completely different thing to present an ABBA song as close to the recorded hit as possible," he says.

"The ABBA-recorded songs have so many details and variations in the arrangements, mixes and sound. We have really looked back at how we played the songs and analysed them from all angles."

The "smoking horn riff" on ABBA's 1979 hit single, *Voulez-Vous*, was the brainchild of Stengård, along with trombonist Nils Landgren and saxophonist Haldor Palsen.

"In those days, we played every single note, no track copying, no autotune – what we played is on that record. When we finished recording the riff with

overdubs, Björn mentioned that he thought something was missing in the introduction. That day, I brought my new soprano sax with me to the studio, thinking, 'You never know, it might come in handy'. So I picked it up, played a little line reminding me of an old jazz standard called *Nature Boy*, that fitted perfectly into the composition. 'That's what we want!' was Björn and Benny's reaction. So I recorded that seven-note mini-melody twice in a couple of minutes."

The Original Band are also the sole ABBA tribute act with the rights to use the ABBA brand. "It is very important to respect copyright laws. We have continuous communications concerned with what we are allowed to do, making sure the advertising is correct, having all permissions in order concerning using copies of ABBA costumes on stage, merchandise prints, as well as the only band in the world to have the permission to show photos of ABBA when we are performing."

And adding even more credibility to their particularly unique tribute is the involvement of designer Sandström, the man responsible for every ABBA stage outfit after their 1974 Eurovision Song Contest triumph. "Owe is actually a member of the band, even though he doesn't play an instrument. He is also a very important part of our show, as he appears on stage presenting some of the original costumes and telling the true story about them. We are actually the only performing band in the world to have original copies of the ABBA costumes, as well as costumes designed by Owe Sandström to underline the typical ABBA look."

It's impossible to put a figure on the number of ABBA tribute acts. There are so many. You might be harbouring one now in your spare room. Listen out for the hurdy gurdy dialect of the Swedish chef from *Sesame Street* strangling *The Winner Takes It All*. But one of the first – and arguably the best known – are Björn Again, formed by Melbourne native Rod Stephen in 1988. "As a teenager who was more interested in English progressive-rock music, I witnessed the birth and death of 70s music and fashion," he recalls.

"I was not really a fan of any of it, especially ABBA, as it appeared to me to be throwaway girlie pop. After enduring the following decade of mostly dire 80s New Romantic twaddle, while attempting to succeed in a number of original and covers bands, I studied closer the form of New Zealand band Split Enz and wondered how I could do something that was as much fun and as entertaining. I knew my own music wouldn't cut it, so I decided to focus on something that had been popular in the past, but to rework it and give it a new twist.

"The year was 1988. ABBA's music and fashion of the 70s was all-but-forgotten. Nobody wore those clothes anymore. Nobody listened to 70s music, much less ABBA. So to put things on its head, I believed a

"It is one thing to play an ABBA song. It's a completely different thing to present an ABBA song as close to the recorded hit as possible..." **JOHAN STENGÅRD, THE ORIGINAL BAND**

This page **Malin Kernby and Linda Frithiof, alias Frida and Agnetha of The Original Band**

Facing page **Revival recreating the famous shot from ABBA's *Greatest Hits***

show based on ABBA, with theatrics like Split Enz, the music rocked up and a healthy dose of satire and comedy, including observations about ABBA's relationship issues played out on stage, would at the very least be great fun to do. I had no idea it would be that well received by audiences."

After eight months of rehearsing, programming, arranging and choreographing, and despite "the show not being as good as it should be", Björn Again launched at a small Melbourne pub in May, 1989. "The advertising chalkboard out the front said 'Björn Again: ABBA Revival Show'. That was all that was needed to sell the 300 tickets. The response from the small audience was astounding. There was a great write-up in the music press. Björn Again was offering up something unique and different, and most of all, fun. By the end of 1989, Björn Again were on national television and selling out five shows a week consistently around Melbourne."

The buzz about Björn Again made it to Europe, where there was interest from promoters in Sweden, Ireland and the UK. 28 years and more than 150 members later, arguably, they remain the best known and possibly best loved of ABBA disciples. In 1992, at the request of Nirvana, they appeared at the Reading Festival.

The biggest thrills, though, were a 1990 meeting with Benny and Björn in Stockholm – and subsequently being asked to promote ABBA's *Gold* album for them on Swedish TV – and entertaining Agnetha at a private party in 2007. "All four members (of ABBA), as well as the fifth, former manager Stig Anderson, have all offered various comments about Björn Again. I guess, most significantly, Björn stated, 'An ABBA revival was inevitable, but Björn Again certainly initiated it'," Stephen proudly declares.

Yet he doesn't regard Björn Again as a tribute act, claiming "the content of the show is actually quite different to the approach of ABBA tribute bands we see today". However, different it may be, the content of the show does include glamming up – which Stephen acknowledges is integral to the concept. "When Björn Again started, the very notion of wearing platform shoes, flares and the various outrageous glam costumes ABBA had when everybody else was wearing 1980s smart Italian, New Romantic style, was in itself a part of the whole parody package.

"The look of Björn Again wearing what was then a very outmoded and dated style stood off the page and so worked in our favour. It wasn't so much an appropriation of ABBA's look in order to directly copy them, rather a way of saying, 'What right-minded person would actually wear these clothes and get away with it?' I guess the impact wouldn't have been the same were the ABBA costumes not used."

Revival are meticulous in their attention to every ABBA detail, which explains why the Agents Association Of Great Britain have honoured them for the past four years, with an accolade judged on production, marketing and proximity in both sound and look to ABBA. "There were over 100 ABBA tribute acts in the UK when we started, but still we knew there was definitely a space for a high-quality ABBA experience with a well-rehearsed performance, excellent stage show, authentic props and, above all, a passion for the music," says John Reilly.

"Most of our members have performed in other bands and tribute acts, and knew what it would take to be better than a lot of the rest. It's kind of a distilled group of very talented individuals who came together with a single purpose – to put their experience and talent on the line and be the best they could be."

Revival have been careful not to "fall into the parody category", of which there are several examples in ABBA world. "They focus on the kitsch fashions of the 70s, and the outdated attitudes of the time. This sometimes can be quite negative, and there is a real risk that you become classed as a comedy band. We are more interested in the incredible output of ABBA and their timeless catalogue of hits. If you watch any of ABBA's original concert footage, you'll quickly realise just how cool they were live, from a cutting-edge light and sound show to costume design which was way ahead of its time during the late 70s. We want to emulate that, to celebrate ABBA the band, not parody it.

"We all have elements of the original band's personalities and add that to the performance, although to 'over-mimic' could be seen again as parody. We make it clear that we are a genuinely talented and hard-working band playing amazing music from one of the best bands of all time. If we can bring a fraction of the energy to our performance that ABBA did, we're happy. We have also studied hours and hours of live performances to really get the look and feel right, from the girls' dance moves to the boys' movements and mannerisms."

Revival even went so far as to source the correct props, instruments costumes and hairstyles – even the exact shape of Benny's beard!

"Sometimes, that has meant heavy investment in bespoke items, custom-made to mirror the originals as closely as possible. It's this attention to detail that helps us assimilate the band and give as much as we do on stage."

ABBAMANIA, who have been touring the world for 16 years, get as close as they can to the sound of ABBA, but are somewhat circumspect when it comes to the look. "Luckily, the girls happen to have a similar look (to Agnetha and Frida), and we have tried to keep it this way," says multi-instrumentalist Steven Galert. "I have always felt it would be too easy to fall into some kind of comical tribute style by wearing wigs. Our costumes are all custom-made to be as close as possible, but you will never see wigs or hear fake accents."

It's remarkable to think that some four decades after disappearing from a scene they had dominated for the previous 10 years, ABBA continue to beguile us, faithful fans and recent converts alike. They straddle the generations with consummate ease. Their peerless pop legacy is assured forever, however long forever may be. And having relinquished the spotlight themselves, they have, in a sense, entrusted that legacy to the tribute acts impelled by a gratitude for the music, meeting an international demand not about to let up any time soon. Both John Reilly and Rod Stephen use the word "timeless" to describe the transcendent appeal of the songs. Stephen believes that "the music and lyrics are still relevant in the same way that The Beatles and Queen music is".

> "We have also studied hours and hours of live performances to really get the look and feel right, from the girls' dance moves to the boys' movements and mannerisms" **JOHN REILLY, REVIVAL**

Johan Stengard puts it most profoundly. "The music of ABBA may be the most popular music in the world. ABBA was, and still is, a wonderful concept of music and performance that so many want to experience live. The hits reach people 180 degrees. One day performing in Salt Lake City for Mormons, the next day performing in Miami at a rainbow festival. This is unique."

Getting the band back together

It was saxophonist Johan Stengård who came up with the idea to create an ABBA tribute act pooled from the various musicians who had backed Sweden's Fab Four. So who are The Original Band's members? "Lasse Wellander recorded most of the guitars and also made all of the ABBA tours. Coming in second must be Mike Watson, who you can hear on all of the albums except *Waterloo* – but there is Mike on the cover, acting like Napoleon!

"Roger Palm drums on many of the early hits, such as *Dancing Queen*, *Mamma Mia* and *Fernando*," Johan tells us. "Åke Sundkvist recorded and toured with ABBA, and Mikael Areklev was in ABBA's studio band. Number one should be my very good friend who, unfortunately, is no longer with us, Rutger Gunnarsson. He was the very best."

Gunnarsson – an arranger and producer as well as a musician – died in 2015. He began his career with Björn Ulvaeus in The Hootenanny Singers. After ABBA, he collaborated with Celine Dion, Westlife, Elton John and Adam Ant. Meanwhile, Stengård has worked with Phil Collins, Michael Bolton and Sammy Davis Jr. Bolton described him as "one of the best sax players that walks the face of the world".