

ABBA

Original Sweden issue: Polar Music POLS 262, released April 21, 1975.

First UK release: Epic EPC 80835, June 7, 1975

FEW WOULD DISPUTE THE ARGUMENT THAT THIS ALBUM WAS THE first wherein Abba became truly recognisable as Abba. There were hints of what was to come in the highlights on *Ring Ring* and *Waterloo*, but this was the first album to feature the soon-to-be-famous multi-layered Abba sound throughout. With one or two exceptions, it was also clear that the group had identified their strengths and their weaknesses, and reached some kind of understanding of what they really wanted to accomplish with their music.

Although the finished album oozed confidence, Abba's status in the international music world was actually a bit shaky when sessions started on August 22, 1974 (the studios used for the album were Glen Studio and Metronome Studio) and were even shakier when sessions finally concluded in March 1975. At the very least, this was the situation in the UK, which they regarded as the home of pop music and where, accordingly, they felt it was most important for them to succeed. The problem was an image tainted through having won the Eurovision Song Contest, which was widely derided for lacking integrity. "Groups like ours that had been tagged as 'Eurovision' were not meant to have more than one hit," recalled Björn.

The remixed 'Ring Ring' single, released as a follow-up to 'Waterloo', reached no higher than 32 on the UK chart. Then, in November 1974 when Abba released the first single from the current album sessions, 'So Long', it tanked completely, failing to register on the chart. The next release, 'I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do', struggled up to number 38 before disappearing again. It wasn't until the third single, 'SOS', released several months after the album, that Abba were back in the UK Top Ten. The album itself didn't enter the chart until January 1976, more than six months after it first hit record shops, and eventually peaked at number 13.

These setbacks almost certainly had more to do with the way the group was perceived than with the quality of the album. Whereas *Ring Ring* had been an album that stumbled its way to completion, and *Waterloo* had been recorded to a fairly strict deadline, with *ABBA*, the band had adopted an "it'll be ready when it's ready" philosophy. When

sessions started in late August, it was announced that the album was scheduled for release before the end of the year – a ludicrous prospect and one that was abandoned fairly soon. A number of tracks in various state of completion were ditched during the autumn sessions, simply because they didn't feel right – something the group couldn't afford to do with the earlier albums. Some of the recordings were worked on forever, with vocal and keyboard overdubs being added and subtracted interminably. Also, for the first time, Agnetha and Frida were finally allowed to dominate vocally, with Björn singing lead on only two tracks. In other words, this was the first album to be constructed as a true Abba album, where extremely catchy, innocent pop songs were afforded the same attention, care and sophisticated treatment as the more overtly “progressive” music created by trend-leading rock bands at the time, and where the group created a soundscape that was all their own.

MAMMA MIA

Benny Andersson/

Stig Anderson/Björn Ulvaeus

MAMMA Mia' was a cracking opening song, instantly signalling the arrival of a new Abba. This was not a group who were about to apologise for wanting to make brilliant pop music, although they were from “backward” Sweden. With its opening tick-tocking marimba and piano figure, it demanded attention and when the spirited joint lead vocal by Agnetha and Frida kicked in, surrender was the only possible option. The lyrics were throwaway, but no more so than any number of love-themed words penned by Brill Building-style songwriters over the years. Clearly, Stig Anderson's bubblegum-flavoured approach to lyric writing was still good and strong – ‘Mamma Mia’ was ‘Waterloo’ revis-

ited: a concept that could be said and understood by everybody everywhere.

Abba's first UK number one since ‘Waterloo’ was also the very last song to be recorded for the ABBA album, with sessions beginning on March 12, 1975. It was the fourth and last worldwide single to be taken off the album, which had everything to do with Abba's breakthrough in Australia in 1975. The promo clips directed by Lasse Hallström – today a prominent Hollywood director – for a number of tracks off the album were shown on Australian television and were instrumental in creating the Abbamania phenomenon down under. In particular, the clips for ‘I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do’ and ‘Mamma Mia’ caused a sensation. At the time, however, ‘Mamma Mia’ had not been released as a single and there were no plans to do so; the Swedes felt that the three singles

released so far – ‘So Long’, ‘I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do’ and ‘SOS’ – were quite enough. But the pleading of the local record company, RCA, finally won through, and ‘Mamma Mia’ shot to number one in Australia, and, subsequently, all over the world.

HEY, HEY HELEN

A BIT OF social commentary backed up by an attempt at a heavy-thumping backing track, one of a number of tracks on the album still to be influenced by the glam rock approach that had coloured much of the *Waterloo* album. The lyrics, questioning the wisdom of a woman who leaves her husband for the sake of independence, were in all likelihood inspired by the 1973 British TV series *Helen: A Woman Of Today*, which had recently been broadcast on Swedish television. Indeed, the phrase “a woman of today” was even used in the lyrics. ‘Hey, Hey Helen’ probably receives few plaudits from feminists; the male half of Abba agreed, later expressing dissatisfaction with the song. Recording began September 14, 1974.

TROPICAL LOVELAND

*Benny Andersson/
Stig Anderson/Björn Ulvaeus*

F RIDA’S only solo lead on the album was the reggae-flavoured

‘Tropical Loveland’, recording for which began February 21, 1975. Although it sported a pleasant enough tune, the milk-white reggae rhythms were perhaps not so successful. Frida herself was later to dismiss it as it “a pretty uninteresting song”.

SOS

*Benny Andersson/
Stig Anderson/Björn Ulvaeus*

I N TERMS of lead vocals, the *ABBA* album clearly belonged to Agnetha. Although she only had one more solo spot than Frida, her vocal performance on ‘SOS’ was an undoubted highlight on the album, as was the song itself. It was among the first tracks to be recorded for *ABBA* – sessions began on August 22, 1974 – but despite its undoubted hit qualities it was only the third single to be lifted off the album.

Many consider ‘SOS’ to be Abba’s first truly masterful pop single: Agnetha’s first “heartbreak classic”, wherein the tear-filled vocal delivery, her trademark, would blend an Anglo/Saxon pop melody with a dash of Swedish melancholy, and an arrangement – characterised by Benny’s semi-classical keyboard flourishes – that was pure Abba. The synthesizer and guitar riffs that underpin the song, being so much of its defining characteristics, were added only at the last minute, late one night when Björn and Benny stayed back to work on the track.

Again, Stig delivered a perfect “international” title along with a set of lyrics that were quite heavily reworked by Björn, whose command of English was unquestionably superior to Stig’s. Although the words are hardly high poetry, there is something to be said for their simplicity, as Agnetha expresses these basic emotions like a primal scream of desolation.

All in all, the result was a brilliant recording that The Who’s Pete Townshend once called “the best pop song ever written”. Indeed, with the release of ‘SOS’ as a single in the autumn of 1975, Abba were finally back in the UK Top Ten, and their credibility as purveyors of solid pop music was firmly restored. Incidentally, Agnetha also recorded a Swedish-language version of the song, included on her 1975 solo album *Elva kvinnor i ett hus* (*Eleven Women In One House*).

MAN IN THE MIDDLE

FEW WOULD dispute that ‘Man In The Middle’ marks a low-point on the *ABBA* album. A lame attempt at funk – “a failed Stevie Wonder try-to-be,” as Benny later phrased it – Björn’s lead vocals did very little to enhance the track. The lyrics constitute some kind of social critique – perhaps as an attempt to appease the Swedish left-wing commentators who put Abba down for not being a politically conscious band – although the message that money

can’t buy you love or happiness was hardly challenging enough for those who cried for revolution.

BANG-A-BOOMERANG

Benny Andersson/
Stig Anderson/Björn Ulvaeus

‘**B**ANG-A-Boomerang’ is a good example of Abba’s developing ambitions, how they would no longer settle for the first attempt at nailing a track – if they felt something was wrong, they would simply start all over again. ‘Bang-A-Boomerang’ was first attempted in September 1974, in a slower version that also featured a different verse melody. Then, in the middle of the album sessions, Benny, Björn and Stig Anderson were invited to submit another song for the Swedish entry in the Eurovision Song Contest. This time, however, it would not be performed by Abba, but by Polar Music recording artists Svenne & Lotta (the married couple were former members of The Hep Stars). Björn and Benny had a second look at ‘Bang-A-Boomerang’, decided that it didn’t really work, and set about rewriting parts of it.

On January 7 and 8, 1975, a completely new version of the song was recorded for Svenne & Lotta. But when the duo performed ‘Bang-A-Boomerang’ in the Eurovision selection, they only finished third, and were thus robbed of the opportunity to feature the song in the main competition, which would have brought them the same kind of

exposure that had worked so well for Abba the previous year. Although the song became a big hit in Sweden, it seemed uncertain whether Svenne & Lotta would be able to “sell” this cracker of a catchy song to an international audience. Never willing to let a good tune go to waste, Abba simply added their own lead vocals to the new backing track and included the song on their new album. This was very much to Svenne & Lotta’s chagrin; they had really hoped that this would be their big international break.

Abba themselves merely used ‘Bang-A-Boomerang’ to strengthen their album. Although it was one of the four songs from the album for which Lasse Hallström made promo clips – the other three being ‘Mamma Mia’, ‘SOS’ and ‘I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do’ – it was never a single in the major territories.

I DO, I DO, I DO, I DO, I DO

Benny Andersson/

Stig Anderson/Björn Ulvaeus

ONE OF the last tracks to be recorded for the album, with sessions starting on February 21, 1975, ‘I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do’ was an affectionate throwback to the *schlager* music of Björn and Benny’s youth. The saxophone sound, and, indeed, the song itself, was a tribute to American bandleader Billy Vaughn. However, despite the catchy melody, on this particular track the wall-of-sound is perhaps a little too dense, making for an

uncomfortable listening experience. Certainly, when released as a single it was hardly the kind of song that would restore Abba to the top of the charts in the UK. Its tongue-in-cheek qualities were seemingly lost on media and audience alike – *Melody Maker* deemed it “so bad it hurts” – and it only reached number 38. However, it fared much better in other parts of the world, reaching number one in Australia, and number 15 in the United States.

ROCK ME

THE LAST in the series of Abba’s small but illustrious glam-influenced rock attempts, recording for which began October 18, 1974, ‘Rock Me’ featured Björn’s second lead vocal on the album. With shades of Slade’s Noddy Holder, his performance here was much more convincing than on ‘Man In The Middle’; of course, it helped that it was also a much better song. *ABBA* marked the last time that Björn would have more than one lead vocal on the group’s albums. Although Björn and Benny both recognised that Agnetha and Frida were far superior singers, for the sake of variety they tried to feature Björn on at least one track per album. And that’s how it would be henceforth, with the exception of *ABBA – The Album* and *Super Trouper*, which featured no Ulvaeus lead vocals.

INTERMEZZO NO. 1

A POPULAR feature on every subsequent Abba tour, the piano and guitar-led instrumental 'Intermezzo No. 1' was a showcase for Benny's classical music influences. He first discovered classical music in 1965, shortly after The Hep Stars' breakthrough. The influence was immediately heard in the spinet arrangement on his second-ever proper composition, The Hep Stars' Swedish number one 'Sunny Girl', and on the church organ introduction that kicked off its follow-up, 'Wedding', also a number one. Bach was a particular favourite at the time – indeed, when recording began for 'Intermezzo No. 1' on October 16, 1974, it had the working title 'Bach-låten' ('The Bach Tune'). For fans of rock music that is overtly "ambitious", the recording probably remains as a highlight in the Abba oeuvre; for those who favour direct pop communication over classical fusion experiments, the track has aged less well.

I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU

*Benny Andersson/
Stig Anderson/Björn Ulvaeus*

AGNETHA'S second solo lead on the album was an attractive ballad, where she again showed her formidable ability to bring life to banal lyrics. The song was wonder-

fully produced, with airy acoustic guitars, dreamy string machine chords, and plaintive electric guitar riffs that echoed Agnetha's vocals, courtesy of Janne Schaffer. Top it off with gorgeous harmony singing by both women, and this could easily have been successful as a featured single side – as indeed it was when it reached number eight in New Zealand in 1977. Recording began September 15, 1974.

SO LONG

THIS ROCKER was among the very first tracks to be recorded for the album, on August 22 and 23, 1974. It was also selected as the very first single from the album sessions, presumably because of its similarities to 'Waterloo' in terms of rhythm, arrangement and energy level. Big mistake. Globally, 'So Long' was to remain Abba's least successful single until the very last tracks released by the group, eight years later. In the UK, it failed to chart at all, and it only reached the Top Ten in one or two countries. Although not the strongest track on the album, the reason for its failure was probably to be found in the general disdain in which former Eurovision winners were held. With the usual energetic lead vocals from Agnetha and Frida, 'So Long' is perhaps the closest Abba ever came to a successful rocker.

Bonus tracks on ABBA

Remastered CD

International issue: Polar Music 549 952-2, July 2001

CRAZY WORLD

'CRAZY WORLD', for which the backing track was recorded on October 16, 1974, was a song Abba threw on the scrap heap during the album sessions. Almost two years later, during the making of *Arrival*, it was dug out again and subjected to further overdubs, but still left off that album. It finally saw release as the B-side of 'Money, Money, Money', towards the end of 1976. Featuring a maudlin lead vocal by Björn, in the character of a wimpish man having doubts about the fidelity of his girlfriend, this ballad takes a long time to reach its somewhat lame punchline: the "other guy" he's seen her with is, in fact, her brother.

MEDLEY: PICK A BALE OF COTTON/ON TOP OF OLD SMOKEY/MIDNIGHT SPECIAL

(1978 Mix)

Trad. Arr. Benny Andersson/

Björn Ulvaeus

THIS MEDLEY of folk songs was recorded May 6, 1975, shortly after the release of *ABBA*. The track was originally released on a West German charity album entitled *Stars Im Zeichen Eines Guten Sterns*, the proceeds of which went to the battle against cancer. According to the recollections of Stig Anderson, the reason for recording folk songs was that they were in the public domain, and thus, the proceeds could go directly to cancer research. Benny, however, seems to remember that the group simply didn't have the time to write anything new. In any event, the folk medley remains the only Abba release of material not written by any of the group members. It was subsequently remixed and issued as the B-side of the 1978 'Summer Night City' single, and that is the mix that appears on this CD.

ABBA Sound + Vision

UK release: Polar Music 981 072-8, June 28, 2004

THIS *SOUND + VISION* EDITION OF THE *ABBA* ALBUM SIMPLY ADDS A DVD of appropriate promo clips to the most recent version of the CD. Unfortunately, the clips used were the old, inferior masters used for VHS release. Since 2002, the clips have been available in remastered quality (see *ABBA On Video/DVD* section).

The DVD tracks are 'Mamma Mia', 'SOS' and 'I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do, I Do'.
