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MUSIC

Marianka Swain explores a new exhibition celebrating ABBA – the band that gets everyone dancing

It's musical magic: without fail, ABBA's "Dancing Queen" fills the floor at any event, and with every generation. Even the Queen is reportedly a fan. So just why are the Swedish mega-band's hits so enduring, and what fuelled their original success?

There's plenty of answers at London's Southbank Centre, where immersive exhibition *ABBA: Super Trouper* puts their work back in its original 1970s context. "We wanted to do this as if we were telling a brand new story," explains exhibition coordinator Madeleine Lynch. "It came about as part of the *Nordic Matters Festival*, our year-long celebration of [Scandinavian] art and culture. That provided an

opportunity to work with Entertainment Exhibitions International and the ABBA Museum in Stockholm, so we've found a way to chart ABBA's work and legacy in a really interesting way: incorporating original archive material – like costumes, photographs and instruments – into a theatrical context."

That means plunging visitors directly into the world of ABBA. "We're examining the context of this work – the fact that the 1970s in the UK were fairly grim in some ways, with political and socioeconomic upheaval, and actually there are some odd parallels to now, like the fact we'd just joined the EEC [European Economic Community]. In this grey and beige period, ABBA

Top right: White boots worn by Benny Andersson on ABBA's North American tour, 1979, hand-painted to match his outfit. Bottom left: Red hare shirt designed by Owe Sandstrom and worn by Agnetha Fältskog. Middle: ABBA in concert.

seemed to float into our ears and onto the airwaves like a breath of fresh air, all optimism and heart and colour. That was hugely appealing, and of course it was helpful of them to translate their music into English too."

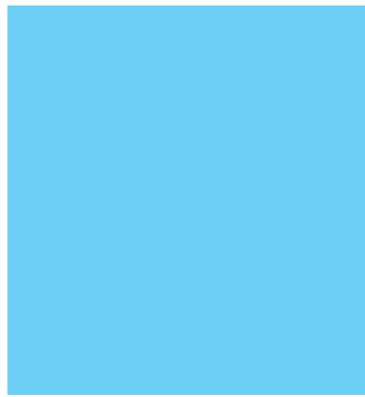
In the exhibition, you move from one period to another through nine rooms that represent key places in the band's life. "There's no text; a host guides you through, bringing those amazing pieces that have been used, held or worn by ABBA to life," says Lynch. "So, for example, we mark their Eurovision victory – a real defining moment – by re-creating the hotel suite in Brighton where they celebrated afterwards, and embedding archive material in that set."

"You can also visit their recording studio in Stockholm, and really learn about the hours and hours of practice and reworking that went into honing those singles. Their classic hits almost sound effortless, but they took enormous effort to produce! They were one of the first bands to develop their own studio set-up like that. Technically, there are really interesting elements at play, like the way they were layering music to get that distinctive ABBA sound."

It wasn't just the sound that made ABBA distinctive – it was the look as well. "Lasse Hallström famously directed their music videos, and some of the most distinctive dance moves came from those videos. Think of the stylised elements, like the heads moving from side to side – that became a signature of their dancing style. Crucially, it's also something people are able to re-create on the floor even now. When 'Dancing Queen' is playing, you'll always see people pointing, as the band point to the crowd in the music video."

So why are ABBA such incredible floor-fillers? "The more research we've done, the more we realise it really is down to the quality of the music. The way it was mixed, and the fact that they did write absolutely killer pop songs. Even now, music journalists comment on their ability and how much they influenced others – everyone from Madonna and Led Zeppelin to Katy Perry have cited them."

"Then the lyrics have real depth as well. So you've got this irresistible beat, a great hook, an up-tempo, cheerful melody, but there's also this soulful, serious, melancholic side to ABBA. The



Clockwise from top left: Suitcase of Dr Olsson, who travelled with ABBA on tour; "Ring Ring" gold disc, celebrating 100,000 singles sold; Green fox dress designed by Owe Sandstrom and worn by Anni-Frid Lyngstad; Fan letters to ABBA from across the world; Gold cape from ABBA's 1977 Australian tour designed by Owe Sandstrom; Brown leather headphones was worn by Frida and Agnetha; Golden cassette record awarded for the single "Super Trouper".

more you listen, the more meaning you find. It's music that works on so many levels, and it has different resonance depending on your stage in life, what you've experienced in terms of love or difficult relationships. It takes you back to those times, because it's so powerful and resonant, but it's also just a joy to dance to in the moment.

"Kids don't need to understand all of that: on a primal level, they just know it's [music that's] fun to move their bodies to, and have a great time. So it's euphoric and escapist – and very catchy! It transcends similar music of the time, like the Elton John or disco elements you can hear, by layering in something deeper too. It's music that grows with us all: how we feel, how we express ourselves, how we sing and dance."

Lynch is thrilled to showcase ABBA paraphernalia never seen in the UK before, thanks to the combination of museum loans and those from private archives. "There are some very special items, like one of the gold capes that Frida wore – still stained with rainwater from a concert in Sydney – or Benny's

white boots, which started off as brown but were painted to match his outfit. There are lovely personal things, too, like handwritten notes, as they build up as a four-piece – notes Frida took when they were rehearsing for early shows, describing how they should move while singing. It's wonderful to see the origins of what's become so distinctive."

As for ABBA's endurance, Lynch points to the numerous showcases for their music, from *Mamma Mia!* to its popularity in dance shows, cabarets and social occasions like weddings and parties. "We've found that you can go almost anywhere in the world and if ABBA comes on, people start dancing. It's the great unifier."

Visitors to the Southbank Centre had the chance to prove their devotion at several participation events on the opening weekend of the exhibition. ABBAoke took over the Royal Festival Hall's Clore Ballroom on the evening of December 17. During the day, there was a Dancing Queens workshop, run by dancer, choreographer and instructor Bethan Peters, who taught easy routines set to some of the favourites from ABBA's back catalogue. "Everyone's welcome," enthused the Southbank Centre's participation producer Ruth Hardie. "That's absolutely in the spirit of ABBA, who bring people together, and in the spirit of the Southbank. Particularly since

our reopening, we've concentrated on providing free arts activities for everyone, and while different themes attract different people, I can't think of many who'll walk by a fun group dancing along to ABBA and not be tempted to stop and join in! "It's a lovely way to celebrate the opening of this exhibition, which is really all about you discovering the ABBA story in your own way, being a part of it, and coming out feeling ready to party." ■

ABBA: Super Trouper is at the Royal Festival Hall on London's South Bank until April 29, 2018. Visit southbankcentre.co.uk or see Calendar for further details.