

“So I thank ABBA for the music, for giving it to me”: ABBA fandom in the twenty-first century – FINAL

I am delighted to be here to present some preliminary findings from my research on ABBA fandom. Through my paper, I will show that though ABBA is very much part of our contemporary everyday life, ABBA *fandom* remains a more private, hidden phenomenon. I will take you through some prominent manifestations of ABBA, whilst adapting existing terminology from Habermas, Warner and Anderson. I will then describe how these manifestations of ABBA are engaged with by:

- Fans with a capital F (which I define as self-proclaimed, highly knowledgeable and dedicated fans who are fully immersed in and engage with ABBA fandom)
- fans with a small f (which I define as self-proclaimed, somewhat knowledgeable and dedicated fans who may or may not be immersed in and engage with some facets of ABBA fandom)
- ABBA appreciators/listeners (those who like with the music but who do not self-identify as one of the aforementioned fan categories, or who may not be that knowledgeable)

By sharing fan interests and practice with you, I will examine the following questions:

1. Who are the various groups of ABBA fans?
2. How is ABBA being recreated, re-performed and reappropriated, now that the group is no longer active?

Whilst I hope that ABBA need no introduction, perhaps I should remind you of who the band were!

- In 1972, two Swedish singer-songwriters – Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson – recorded the single ‘People Need Love’ with their significant others, Agnetha Fältskog and Anni-Frid ‘Frida’ Lyngstad.
- In 1974, they came to mainstream attention by winning that year’s Eurovision Song Contest, under the moniker ABBA.
- ABBA had No.1 hits in Europe, Australasia, North America, South America, and Africa¹ The band were most popular in the UK and Australia. You can see some statistics indicating their worldwide popularity on this slide.
- The dream, however, was not to last. The two married couples ended up divorcing and in 1982, took a break to pursue new ventures. Since then, they have refused to publicly reform.²
- 1992 saw the release of the post-ABBA greatest hits album, ABBA Gold, ABBA’s popularity in Australia lead to the use of ABBA songs in the 1994 Australian films *Muriel’s Wedding* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. This brought ABBA’s music back to prominence and to a younger, wider audience.
- ABBA’s music made its biggest comeback (to date) through the musical *Mamma Mia!* (1999) and its subsequent film version (2008).^{3 4}
- In May 2013, ABBA – The Museum opened. It has had over half a million visitors in less than 2 years!⁵ ABBA tourism also extends to *Mamma Mia!* film location tours on the Greek island of Skopelos, or the annual gathering of the Official International ABBA Fan Club in Roosendaal, The Netherlands.

¹ <http://www.abbacharts.com/>, accessed 3rd March 2015

² <http://uk.eonline.com/news/39358/abba-s-billion-dollar-rejection>, accessed 17th March 2015

³ <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/photo-special-celebrating-13-years-of-mamma-mia-on-broadway-and-the-work-of-ultimate-super-trouper-judy-mclane-336971>, accessed 3rd March 2015

⁴ <http://www.25thframe.co.uk/charts/top-grossing-movies-uk.php>, accessed 7th April 2015

⁵ Interview with Ingmarie Halling, Museum Curator, ABBA – The Museum, on 13th March 2015

- Today, the Official International ABBA Fan Club (set up in 1986) boasts around 1400 members, of which roughly 50% are male and 50% female, with ages ranging from 7 to 88 years old. Another notable fan club is ABBA Intermezzo (set up 1990), which has subscribing fans aged from 6-83, and a total of around 1,500 members with an even split between men and women.

It is clear that ABBA continues to be present in the mainstream, but to what extent can ABBA Fandom (capital F) be considered part of a public *sphere*? For Habermas, the public sphere was very much political and visible, involving people congregating to critique issues affecting society. People in the public sphere are known to one another, engaged in the discussion, and there are few barriers to joining debates when compared with previous centuries, when class and public status mattered.

Whilst ABBA Fandom (capital F) has its own internal politics, it is not overtly political; it is also not very visible. Yet there are ways in which Habermas is useful for understanding ABBA fandom. Whilst media has transformed social spaces in ways Habermas could not have envisaged in 1962, ABBA fandom is still very much based around people congregating to share an appreciation of ABBA. This can be in a 'real-life' physical meet-up or by joining the plethora of ABBA-related Facebook groups, an example being ABBAtalk (which has just under 7000 members). Discussions do occur in both spaces through the sharing of information and though it is not the sole or primary purpose, there is often "critical" debate about issues concerning ABBA.

Although I have just outlined a case for ABBA fandom to be considered part of a public sphere, I feel there are significant limitations and problems with this term. Whilst it is true that there are very prominent and popular manifestations of ABBA in the public domain, ABBA *fandom* itself tends to be somewhat more covert, chiefly due to being very uncool; this makes it more difficult to label.

What is the best term to categorise ABBA fandom? 'Subcultural' would be incorrect as it would imply that ABBA were not mainstream but instead opposed to the dominant parent and working-class cultures. 'Neo-tribes', as theorised by Maffesoli,⁶ and Sara Thornton's 'club cultures'⁷ are equally oppositional and counter-cultural to the mainstream, though Thornton's discussion of people accruing "subcultural capital" is not irrelevant to ABBA fandom. Whilst Will Straw's discussion of 'scenes' is more fluid than 'neo-tribes' and 'club cultures', class is one of the barriers that divides people into separate 'scenes';⁸ this is not the case with ABBA fandom, though. It is not underground due to being illegal, like the Mafia, or scandalous, like prostitution, say; yet it is not entirely open for anyone to see or join in with either.

Michael Warner's term 'counterpublics' or Anderson's well-known concept of 'imagined communities' offer further tools for placing ABBA Fandom (capital F). A 'counterpublic' is not a 'public' in that it is not the dominant group but equally, it need not be counter-cultural. Counterpublics are not a single entity – they are multiple. Unlike subcultures, counterpublics have no boundaries and encompass fluctuating numbers of people - one can never know how many people are in a counterpublic at any given time. Counterpublics are also marked by the fact that belonging does not require active participation; one can pay little or no attention, and still be a part of the counterpublic. One sees this in ABBA fandom in that although both the real-world fan clubs and the Facebook groups have thousands of members, only a few hundred at most (if even that) will actively participate, e.g. attend the fan gathering in Roosendaal, or comment on posts in Facebook groups.

Warner's emphasis on strangers within counterpublics is in stark contrast to Habermas's notion that the people are already known to one another before congregating together. An ABBA fan who joins a fan club – whether 'real life' or virtual – is unlikely to know anyone else in the group

⁶ Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: Sage, 1996)

⁷ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995)

⁸ Sara Cohen, 'Scenes', in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* ed. Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), p.245

at first. Any ABBA fan club typically starts off as a group of strangers, who share or circulate their love of ABBA in such ways that, eventually, it coalesces them into a counterpublic.

Anderson's earlier concept of an imagined community is somewhat similar to this: QUOTE
...imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.⁹END QUOTE

Whilst Anderson talked of nationalism, one can easily apply these concepts to the smaller, more insular world of the ABBA Fan (capital F). It is true that even in a close-knit group such as ABBAtalk, the volume of posts and number of people involved mean that no one can aspire to knowing everyone. Due to being dispersed around the world, many cannot entertain the thought of ever meeting... yet some of them have met each other in person and have done so for many years. Media has changed the very nature of fandom and fan clubs in such a way that the 'imagined community' Anderson talks of becomes more concrete, with people able to put a face to a name at the very least. The QUOTE "image of their communion" END QUOTE is more of a shared reality than what Anderson could ever have anticipated (his work on 'imagined communities' being pre-Internet).

Since ABBA Fandom (capital F) continues to remain somewhat hidden, there is tension between the 'public' ABBA fandom (with a small f) and the 'counterpublic' ABBA Fandom (with a capital F). For example, despite the success of the *Mamma Mia!* film, leading to (renewed?) ABBA fandom (with a small f), it is still not cool within the 'public' to be an ABBA Fan (with a capital F). This is exemplified best, and has been intensified by the portrayal of ABBA fandom in the aforementioned film, *Muriel's Wedding*. It is about a QUOTE "ABBA-obsessed misfit" END QUOTE who longs for a fairy-tale wedding but lacks a groom. Muriel's stagnant identity is intrinsically tied-up with her ABBA fandom in the film. Indeed, in the middle of the film, she says: "When I lived in Porpoise Spit, I'd just stay in my room for hours and listen to ABBA songs. Sometimes I'd stay in there all day. But since I've met you and moved to Sydney, I haven't listened to one ABBA song. It's because now my life's as good as an ABBA song. It's as good as 'Dancing Queen'."¹⁰

Being an ABBA Fan (with a capital F) is synonymous with being an uncool "misfit". Whilst being an ABBA appreciator/listener is more acceptable - there is something about the deeper Fandom (with a capital F) that is perhaps slightly more shameful. On a post on ABBAtalk around one month ago asking whether people were 'out and proud' ABBA fans, some men claimed that not a real-life soul knew that they were an ABBA fan. ABBA Fans (capital F) are in somewhat of a closet culture, not least because a significant number of them are gay men. It would not be right to reduce ABBA Fandom (capital F) to the issue of sexuality and I am therefore focusing on style and aesthetics in this paper. It is interesting to note, though, that one ABBA Fan (capital F) I met at a recent event commented on how homosexual male couples were the majority in attendance and how "ABBA is a safe place to be [gay]"

This is all something I wish to delve into further as part of my research. What *is* certain is that there is disdain amongst some ABBA Fans (capital F) for public ABBA fandom (simple f). Some bemoan the fact that ABBA are seen by public fans (small f) as camp, kitsch or a QUOTE "hit factory" END QUOTE; ABBA Fans (with a capital F) wish to see their musical idols taken more seriously by critics and the public. Somehow, even though the public fans (small f) really like ABBA, they cannot take ABBA as seriously as ABBA Fans (capital F) would wish.

It follows that there is something non-serious (or, to use specific terms, 'camp' and 'kitsch') about ABBA. If we take Susan Sontag's famous definitions of camp and Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts's view of kitsch (see the slide), it would seem ABBA had a camp and kitsch side. They had

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991 – revised and extended), p.7

¹⁰ <http://www.murielweddingmovie.com/Lines/Sydney/linessydney1.htm> , accessed 17th March 2015

bombastic, eye-catching costumes (a partial tax dodge¹¹), a strong and pretty female presence and luscious, soaring melodies – all the ingredients for a camp, kitsch musical cocktail. The costumes live on as part of the ABBA public fan (small f), appreciator and listener legacy through tribute bands who copy the image down to the last detail. *Mamma Mia!* the musical and the film ham up the camp side of ABBA, too. Thus it is no surprise that this is how ABBA are remembered in public fandom (with a small f).

Such fandom is not exhibited or embraced by ABBA Fans (with a capital F), which perhaps explains why tribute bands are not popular among them. When I asked members of ABBAtalk whether they had seen any tribute bands and what they had thought of them, there was a mixed response. Many had seen at least one tribute band but were left unimpressed by them; some disputed the term ‘tribute’ band, claiming that they were not a tribute to ABBA but merely a ‘cover band’. ABBAtalk member KF told me

They are only popular with people who like ABBA’s hits... It’s not popular with died-in-the-wool fans (like most of us here on ABBAtalk) but with the hoi polio [SIC] who like Dancing Queen and Mamma Mia and would probably try and sing it themselves at a drunken karaoke.

This sentiment was echoed by other ABBAtalk members. Generally, the members of ABBAtalk refute that ABBA were camp and/or kitsch, pointing out that many other groups and artists at the time were similarly engaged in the glam rock image and era.

As far as I can tell from my initial fieldwork, there is no bad blood between Fans (capital F), fans (small f) and ABBA appreciators/listeners. There IS, however, a clear hierarchy that has naturally formed between so-called “oldies” (fans – both capital and small fs – who were alive when ABBA were together) and “Goldies” (fans – both capital and small fs – who came to know of ABBA through ABBA Gold and/or after the band had split). The “oldies” are a mixture of Fans (with a capital F) and fans (with a small f), as are the “Goldies”; that said, both the owners of the Official International ABBA Fan Club and the ABBA Intermezzo fan clubs confirmed that most of their members were aged 40-55. It would seem that it is typically the older generation who are the “card-carrying” ABBA Fans (with a capital F). That is not to say that younger generations cannot aspire to ABBA Fandom (with a capital F) – indeed, the person who runs ABBAtalk is only a few years older than I am! It is fair to say, though, that people my age are at a natural disadvantage.

Another thing that separates the Fan (capital F) from the fan (simple f) appears to be an interest in collecting merchandise and memorabilia. In both virtual and real-life exchanges, there is often focus on sharing pictures of one’s ever-increasing ABBA collection. JG told me on 28th March 2015, “i [SIC] have been collecting ABBA for 40 years now. i [SIC] have hundreds if not a thousand cd’s [SIC] and albums from all over the world.” Many other Fans (capital F) also have sizeable collections, including multiple copies of a single product, e.g. an album on vinyl, cassette, CD, remastered CD, etc. When I asked members of ABBAtalk whether a bigger collection increased one’s status in the ABBA Fan (with a capital F) world, most people insisted it did not, although a few conceded it might. ABBAtalk member PW told me, “Shanika in a way we are all collectors ... whether it be ABBA dolls,[,] ABBA Soap on a Rope or rare labels and releases . Like ABBA we are proud of our individual collections... but are not 'size queens'... and never boast mine is bigger or better than yours!” One of the things I wish to investigate as part of my thesis is to what extent merchandise sales are successful and who they target, and how the sales figures compare amongst self-identifying Fans (capital F) and fans (small f).

I would like to conclude by drawing attention to how ABBA fandom has, as alluded to before, not only survived independently of the group, but has taken on a life of its own completely separate from the group themselves. Take, for example, the film *Mamma Mia!* For some of my friends, and surely countless people my age and younger, it was their first proper exposure to

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/feb/16/abba-outfits-tax-deduction-bjorn-ulvaeus> , accessed 4th March 2015

ABBA's music. For some young people, these are not ABBA songs – they are “songs from *Mamma Mia!*” (This is clear from comments made by members of the ABBAtalk group about their children or relatives' children.) The popularity of copycat and tribute bands is a testament to ABBA's popularity, but also to how ABBA is being reappropriated in the twenty-first century.

One could liken this continued fandom to what Svetlana Boym calls “reflective nostalgia”, which “dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance... reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time”.¹² ABBA fandom has everything and nothing to do with ABBA, as fans old and young alike mourn for what had been and what will never be again, and use various means such as tribute bands, copycat bands like the A*Teens, new ABBA-related merchandise and memorabilia to fill the gap left by the band's split.

There is still much for me to explore in ABBA fandom but I hope this paper has raised interesting questions about ABBA fandom: what it is and why it keeps going, in spite of the band's refusal to reform. By considering ABBA Fandom (capital F) to be an imagined community which contrasts with the public sphere of ABBA fandom (small f), listenership and appreciation, one can begin to understand where ABBA fandoms (simple and capital fs/Fs) have come from and where they may go in the future. Thanks for listening!

¹² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Perseus Books, 2001), p.41