

Elvis Lives in Amsterdam paper- Dec 2018

Historically, interactions between pop icons and their super-fans have sometimes been classified as 'para-social', i.e. one-sided and imagined by the super-fan. The relationship has been thought of as perceived rather than actual; consequently, super-fan reactions to disappointments or surprises regarding their idols, have appeared disproportionate. This paper uses Marcel Mauss' work on gift exchange, as well as more recent work by C.A. Gregory and Annette B. Weiner, to suggest a new framework for looking at popular music super-fans. I use ABBA as a case study, to demonstrate how economic anthropological terms can be applied to pop star-super-fan interactions. When viewed in this light, we see it as a real, genuine relationship, but of an unequal and often mediated or indirect nature. I will suggest that the activities of ABBA, including their music, constitutes a form of affective labour (as theorised by Hardt and Negri) towards super-fans. Equally, super-fans' emotional and financial investment constitutes affective labour towards ABBA. I will examine the recent announcement of ABBA's 2 new singles and super-fan reactions to this after ABBA's 35-year hiatus, through C.A. Gregory's concept of gift-debt and what can be termed 'disconnected giving'. I also discuss how through this giving (back), an exchange is created, and a real (rather than 'para-social') relationship is forged.

In doing this, I show an alternative way of understanding popular music super-fans. I highlight how giving in the form of affective labour and other activities, creates disconnected but nonetheless substantive relationships between star and super-fan. Seeing super-fandom in this light, we come to a more nuanced appreciation of the pain and betrayal some super-fans feel when their efforts within the mediated relationship are not reciprocated or valued, in ways that somehow balance their investment in pop icons.

ABBA super-fans have had a tough time since ABBA's inception in 1972. ABBA released their first album in 1973 but came to international attention when they won the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest. After a difficult start in the charts, ABBA went on to release 7 further studio albums, have no.1 hits across the five main continents, and complete three successful world tours. They are reported to be the third biggest-selling pop act in British history.

The dream was not to last, however: the two married couples – Agnetha and Björn, Anni-Frid (commonly known as Frida) and Benny - divorced and in late 1982, ABBA decided to go on what they called a short break. Few anticipated how long that would be – it ended up being over 35 years. The subsequent years were difficult for fans – not only with uncertainty about whether ABBA would resurface, but because ABBA became distinctly unpopular during the 1980s. Super-fans tell me they refer to these years as the dark years. Some recall being bullied – and even beaten up - for liking ABBA, even in the early 1990s. Even though ABBA had stopped giving new music to their super-fans, the super-fandom persevered nonetheless. They kept their relationship with ABBA alive through continued giving, which I will outline later in this paper.

So ABBA have announced they are finally back, after over 35 years. How do ABBA super-fans feel about this sudden announcement, after decades of continued loyalty and devotion towards the group? How does this shape the ongoing relationship dynamic between ABBA and their super-fans? What exactly are ABBA giving (back) to their fans now – and will it ever be enough? These are some of the questions I will be asking and attempting to begin to answer in this paper, which is a preliminary exploration of these issues, based on my ongoing ethnographic fieldwork.

Before I launch into my ethnographic work with ABBA super-fans and the theoretical ways of framing it, it is important to very briefly contextualise ABBA's "comeback". The virtual ABBA-tars tour project is just one of many ABBA-related ventures that have arisen within recent history. It was first announced in October 2016, as a collaboration between the four ABBA members and music mogul Simon Fuller. Whilst few details were given, it was gradually noted that all four ABBA members were involved and that virtual avatars (or ABBA-tars) of their 1979 selves would "perform" their old hits on stage with a live band. The decision to be represented as their 1979 selves was made by Agnetha and Frida.

There had been no indication – and indeed, no hope at all – of new music as part of the ABBA-tars tour. For many ABBA super-fans (though not all), the thought of ABBA one day resuming

Elvis Lives in Amsterdam paper- Dec 2018

their music career had been put to bed. ABBA were notoriously elusive as their short break progressed, turning down an offer of \$1 billion US dollars to reform. Between 1987 and mid-January 2016, they refused to appear in public just the four of them standing together (for the press or for fans). This was one of many instances over the 35-year hiatus period in which ABBA refused to give their super-fans, something that they longed for. Though there had been two brief moments in 2016 where the four ABBA members had been seen together, just them, in a public space, there seemed little hope of new music.

Imagine, then, the disbelief and mixed emotions on 27th April 2018, when ABBA released the following statement on Instagram:

The decision to go ahead with the exciting ABBA avatar tour project had an unexpected consequence. We all four felt that, after some 35 years, it could be fun to join forces again and go into the recording studio. So we did. And it was like time had stood still and that we only had been away on a short holiday. An extremely joyful experience! It resulted in two new songs and one of them "I Still Have Faith In You" will be performed by our digital selves in a TV special produced by NBC and the BBC aimed for broadcasting in December. We may have come of age, but the song is new. And it feels good.

Agnetha Benny Björn Anni-Frid

Stockholm, Sweden, April 27th, 2018

Reactions from ABBA fans across the world (myself included) quickly followed. This day has gone down in ABBA history, yet not everyone's reaction to the news was positive. One ABBA super-fan, Fan A, was so angry that he archived the Facebook group he runs overnight (meaning its 12,000-odd members could read old posts but not make any new ones). Fan A made the following Facebook post on 27th April about his feelings after hearing the announcement, stating, "I'm not sure I have any more faith to invest in Agnetha, Benny, Björn and Anni-Frid... We've invested in these four people emotionally and accepted what they said could NEVER happen again ... and that's OK? ... I'm already disappointed in ABBA before I've heard a single enhanced note".

On first reading, his rage may seem disproportionate to the situation. But when viewed through the academic lenses of affective labour and ideas of gifts and reciprocity, it begins to make more sense. If we consider, as C.A. Gregory would, that the emotional investment Fan A mentions has incurred a 'gift-debt' that ABBA must redress, it becomes apparent that ABBA insufficiently reciprocated their super-fans' giving over the years. This has led to a power imbalance between ABBA and their super-fans, with fans giving more than they receive from ABBA, yet continuing to give in the form of affective labour.

Affective labour was defined by Hardt and Negri as the "human contact and interaction" that stems from immaterial labour. Immaterial labour is "labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication". Such labour is more intangible and less overt than other labour, but remains potent and has enduring consequences; this is especially true of the entertainment industry. Hardt and Negri noted that:

what is really essential to [the entertainment industry] are the creation and manipulation of affect. Such affective production, exchange, and communication are generally associated with human contact, but that contact can be actual or virtual as it is in the entertainment industry...

Elvis Lives in Amsterdam paper- Dec 2018

During their active years together, ABBA performed affective labour for their super-fans, and vice versa. ABBA super-fans gave a lot back to ABBA from 1972-1982, but also afterwards; not only through their financial backing, but – perhaps more importantly – their emotional investment in ABBA. They bought the records, went to the tour performances, impacting on ABBA's record and ticket sales directly. But they also supported ABBA in less direct ways, continuing to listen to their music and to talk avidly and fondly about ABBA. Even when ABBA went away for their 'career break', the super-fandom barely waned: fans continued to emotionally and financially invest in ABBA, keeping ABBA's name and musical legacy in public consciousness. Indeed, the Official International ABBA Fan Club was set up in the Netherlands in 1986 – some years after ABBA's break began. In this way, ABBA super-fandom and related activities constitute affective labour for ABBA – though it is unclear to what extent ABBA themselves notice or appreciate this labour.

Whilst much of the gift giving literature in anthropology focuses on tangible gifts, the same processes can be applied to intangible gifts, such as fan affective labour. The foundational discussion of gift exchange is found in Marcel Mauss' *An Essay on the Gift* (1925). Mauss concluded that there are "three themes of the gift, the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and reciprocate" [pp.49-50]; these permeate and underpin a wide cross-section of societies at many levels.

Mauss' overarching claim in *An Essay on the Gift* was that gift-giving has the power to elicit a return gift; also, that gifts retain something of their giver and thus forge relationships between giver and receiver. This understanding of strict reciprocity has been challenged by scholars C.A. Gregory and Annette B. Weiner. Gregory spoke of what he terms the "gift-**debt** relationship", whereby the giving away of a gift creates a "creditor-debtor" dynamic in which a balance stands unless redressed; thus reciprocation – in kind or not - may or may not happen. Weiner, meanwhile, talked specifically about the process of 'keeping-while-giving', whereby certain things are kept out of circulation and exchange processes: not everything that *can* be given, *is* given.

To give an example of keeping-while-giving: ABBA have consistently refused to allow fans to officially hear the whole of a track they wrote, titled 'Just Like That', only releasing a snippet of the chorus on their *Thank You For the Music* boxset in 1994. Fans have longed to hear the whole track, but ABBA have given them only the chorus so far, keeping back the full track. For Weiner, keeping-while-giving is key to endowing the owners with power and prestige. The aim with keeping-while-giving is less for equal reciprocity than maintaining status by keeping certain things from being exchanged; the result being unequal giving, which in turn creates a power dynamic in the relationship between giver and receiver.

I argue that we see such power dynamics from unequal giving at play between ABBA and their super-fans. From 1972-1982, ABBA gave a lot to their fans **but** the debt this incurred by fans has been superseded by the debt ABBA have incurred. This debt is that which follows the super-fans' 35-year labour for and towards ABBA, during their absence from the charts. This is not to say that the ABBA members gave nothing at all during that time – some fans clearly felt ABBA were still reaching out through solo projects and collaborations. Equally, though, this was not ABBA – the four band members together, as a quartet - giving. ABBA have effectively kept-while-giving (as Weiner would say) rather than fully giving back to their super-fans. What people wanted was for ABBA to produce new music, or alternatively to release unheard demos and songs from the ABBA vaults. For the most part, Agnetha, Björn, Benny and Frida steadfastly refused to do this, keeping themselves out of circulation, and for the super-fans at least, arguably enhancing their power and prestige. This constitutes unequal giving on ABBA's part.

Mauss and later writers have emphasised that gift-giving creates relationships because the gift retains something of the giver (and indeed, any other previous owners). Something interesting to consider when analysing super-fandom through theories of gift exchange and affective labour, is the fact that the relationship is rarely direct: it is mostly heavily mediated. Fans access ABBA through their songs, through media appearances and interviews. They also access ABBA mainly through contact via people close to the group, e.g. their manager, Görel Hanser, or the ABBA The Museum

Elvis Lives in Amsterdam paper- Dec 2018

curator, Ingmarie Halling. The giving and receiving between ABBA and their super-fans, then, is largely disconnected in nature.

When seen in this context of decades of unequal giving, Fan A's angry reaction to the news of new ABBA songs coming via the virtual ABBAatars, makes sense. For him, this sudden giving by ABBA does not compensate for the fact that various fans passed away without hearing the new ABBA songs. He feels it's somewhat disingenuous on ABBA's part, indicating to me on 27th October 2018 that he did not believe the reasons given for the reunion.

This is not reflective of all ABBA super-fans, though. Many of them were delighted by the news of the new songs and welcome this move by ABBA. I have seen a few super-fans comment that they now had "closure" through the announcement of new music on 27th April 2018. With no formal announcement of a split or a long break, fans were left hanging for decades; now they finally feel ABBA have gifted them what they wanted and needed these past 35 years. Generally, most super-fans have been forgiving and understanding of ABBA's 35-year absence. Although there is unequal giving, not many share Fan A's resentment – though he is certainly not the only one to be disgruntled by ABBA's comeback and the way it is being handled.

Many super-fans learnt to be patient over the years, putting the band members' needs above their own desires and accepting the power imbalance in the relationship. For example, quite a few super-fans - when asked about their dream ABBA comeback – did not state they'd want to see ABBA tour live... despite the fact it is clear from their answers that quite a few would personally like to see that. Whilst some super-fans told me that ABBA had been less good live anyway, it is clear to me that super-fans want the best for the ABBA members, even at their own expense. Though some super-fans hold ABBA to high standard, generally there is an attitude of self-sacrifice amongst many super-fans. One could describe this as a martyr-like position, whereby fans forgo their own wants and needs, in favour of allowing ABBA to maintain their distant status. This is a status produced by the very type of keeping-whilst-giving that Weiner alludes to in her work, as mentioned earlier.

The real excitement is about the new music, but fans seem to concede that this would not have come about without the virtual ABBAatars show. Some fans confirmed to me that they are "intrigued" by the ABBAatars idea and are excited to see how it materialises.

To conclude: ABBA were absent for 35 years. Though Benny insisted there is no 'reunion' because they had never gone away, the reality was very different for their super-fans. The majority had given up hope of ever seeing ABBA perform new (or old) music together again. One super-fan likened ABBA's April announcement to a return from the dead, asking whether her deceased mother could do the same, such was her shock and euphoria at this wholly unexpected news...

Super-fans have kept engaging in ongoing affective labour for the group. The question of what ABBA gave or are giving in return, to pay the gift-debt created by ABBA super-fans' affective labour, is complex. It is unclear whether ABBA know or even care that there is a such a gift-debt, or how much they feel they (want to) genuinely interact with their super-fans. This adds to the sense of imbalance and unevenness. There has been some giving to individual fans over the past three decades, by way of signing autographs and meeting super-fans over the years. Now for the collective fandom, they are performing via the ABBAatars and have announced two new songs, after a 35-year absence. But is this enough for the super-fans, who talk on social media of wanting a whole new album and a Christmas number one?

When will super-fans be satisfied by ABBA's giving, and when would the gift-debt incurred be repaid? These are questions not easily answered and it will take a lot more fieldwork to establish this. I hope I've shown that by considering super-fan-pop idol interactions in terms of affective labour and unequal giving, we can begin to move away from stereotypical images of fans as 'mad' and their star interactions as para-social. It is not para-social: it is disconnected, oft-mediated and unequal, but it is a real relationship. This relationship is substantiated by the long-term giving on both sides, but particularly from super-fans to ABBA. Such giving and receiving through affective labour forms a genuine relationship between star and super-fan, and it is time for people to recognise this.