

## **Rock and Roll Posse—interactive version: Who makes the better case: Does ABBA Deserve to be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?**

Posse member and friend for life Ernie Sanchez, the first General Counsel of NPR, and more importantly, the guy who ran the high school IHM Seminary jukebox, and handed the reins to me when he graduated, ventures forth to reply to my brief. I am so happy to be doing this with Ernie, my first inspiration for learning rock and roll, and friend of almost 50 years.

**Please hit REPLY TO ALL and weigh in—once per Posse member.**

Michael and Ernie

## **Does ABBA Deserve to be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?**

### **The Brief Against ABBA**

Greatness in a rock and roll band, or in any other style of music, requires several ineffable qualities, the mixture of which is largely subjective. In my view, sheer musicianship and virtuosity count, as do originality, influence upon other musicians, and reach. While these criteria are largely self-explanatory, “reach” is a combination of popularity, freshness, and recognizability of the group or individual’s style. To give several examples, The Beatles, Dylan, Michael Jackson, Brian Wilson, Aretha, The Rolling Stones, Van Morrison, Bruce Springsteen, and CSNY all possess these traits, which also suggests that longstanding dedication as an artist developing their art—an arc and trajectory of a career—also counts. These artists are (or were) so distinctive that many listeners can tell one of their songs from a few introductory notes or chords, and can even tell the innate structure of their songs when they are covered by other artists. A group can also be great when it contains many excellent members, who later exceed the sum of the original parts; here, I would cite The Yardbirds, Spencer Davis Group, Buffalo Springfield, The Byrds, and a number of other groups who developed early talent which later became extraordinary talent in subsequent groups or as solo artists. This does not mean that every song or every attempt is successful, but that the truly great develop a style and distinctive voice, and their work feeds into the slipstream of rock and roll or whatever genre is under discussion.

I would argue that ABBA, especially the two male leaders Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Anderson (the BB of ABBA) were good tunesmiths and successful within the pop and disco tradition, but that they lacked what I consider to be the quintessential characteristics of greatness, and do not deserve to be in the Rock and roll Hall of Fame. I set aside the argument of the odd and vulnerable insider process of being selected to the RRHF, and acknowledge that there are groups and individuals who have been selected who do not deserve the honor (I would give as examples ABBA, the O’Jay’s, and a number of other inductees) and to my way of thinking, there are deserving artists who have not yet been inducted, most notably Yusuf Islam, f/k/a Cat Stevens and the Moody Blues.

But why ABBA? In fairness, they are not nothing. In reviewing the ABBA album *The Definitive Collection* (2010), the perceptive Rolling Stone reviewer noted, “The Swedish pop stars ABBA may be the quintessence of kitsch but on “Waterloo” “Dancing Queen” “Fernando” “Take a

Chance on Me" and "Mamma Mia" Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson display an uncanny knack for choruses that become permanently hooked in the cranium." In an earlier review of their 1983 Atlantic album *The Singles*, another RS reviewer was also positive: "This twenty-three-song collection (singles plus two new cuts) confirms what a lucky few in the U.S. have known for some time. Abba is the greatest pop band of the last ten years." The *Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll* (Simon & Schuster, 2001) summarized their career: "Easily the most commercially successful group of the 1970s, Abba became the focus of a revival in the early 1990s, when its *Abba Gold* topped charts around the world. Abba's whole-some image and buoyant, catchy records made the group international pop stars. . . ." By my own criteria, which do not measure album sales (or downloads today) as the only source of popularity, ABBA was successful, especially outside the U.S., and had several songs that were quite singable and hook-laden.

However, until the extraordinary success of the Broadway collection of ABBA songs, *Mamma Mia*, ABBA had never been successful in U.S. sales. Of all their songs in the dozen years they were together as an active band, only one ABBA song made it to No. 1 in the US (*Dancing Queen* in 1977). Indeed, only one song before (*Waterloo*, # 6 in 1974), and after (*Take a Chance on Me*, #3 in 1978) even made it into the U.S. Top Ten, during the height of pop and disco. Thus, while they were popular in overall sales, surely a fair measure of success and acclaim, I would argue that the halo-effect of the long-running Broadway show *Mamma Mia* has artificially inflated their reputation and gave them the timely boost into the Hall of Fame. More meaningful measures would be the RS Top 500 songs of all time (which does not include an ABBA song), Grammys (ABBA never received one), or other artists appropriating their songs. By these important criteria, ABBA was an underachiever. Finally, greatness can also be measured like flattery, the sincerest form of acknowledging influence. Here, I beg you to listen if you can to Pierce Brosnan in *Mamma Mia*, after which I rest my case:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptWuPFG7GI4>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvTEvmhnAMk>

To be sure, there is an ABBA style, with catchy song riffs and hummable tunes, which were written and performed by the group—an important measure of accomplishment, and most of my Posse readers can name or even sing one or two of their distinctive songs. I am chagrined that several members have written to scold me about my view of ABBA, and I am pretty sure at least one has removed me from her will as a result. In fact, Ernie Sanchez, a high school seminarian classmate and the first General Counsel of NPR, who introduced me to the Beatles and Procol Harum (nominated in 2012 but not chosen for the RRHF) as keepers of the IHM jukebox, a trust I inherited from him, has challenged me to a dual. I have prepared my brief, and he will fashion a reply-brief, and we submit them now to you for your evaluation. **The Question is: Does ABBA Deserve to be in the RRHF? Please hit REPLY and vote, and we will post the results.**

**REPLY BRIEF, for ABBA:**

WHY ABBA DESERVES TO BE THE IN THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME  
by Ernie Sanchez of the Sanchez Law Firm P.C. , Washington, DC

Swedish musical Group ABBA was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (“RRHF”) in 2010. Not everyone liked that decision, including my lifetime friend Law Professor Michael Olivas. Michael is brilliant, perceptive, and articulate and an acknowledged rock and roll scholar. So you might expect that Michael’s opinion on this matter should be the last word. Well, not so fast. Every decade or so, Michael is wrong about something. That is the case here. Michael cites some of ABBA’s merits described in the Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll. He agrees that ABBA’s two male leaders were “good tunesmiths” and “successful within the pop and disco tradition.” But, he argues they lacked “the quintessential characteristics of greatness” which would qualify them for the RRHF. He suggests that the extraordinary success of ABBA’s Broadway musical “Mama Mia,” propelled ABBA into the RRHF, despite mediocre 1970’s US record sales and chart performances. He notes ABBA received no contemporary recognition from the Grammys or from the Rolling Stone list of Top 500 Songs of all time. Essentially, he complains that ABBA lacked artistic merit or commercial success. I have offered to champion ABBA’s position, as someone who lived in Copenhagen in the late 1960’s, and who followed the musical careers of ABBA’s members before they became ABBA in the 1970’s. It was my good fortune to broadcast, on Radio Denmark, many of those pre-ABBA Swedish recordings. I believe ABBA has been unfairly marginalized, by some who don’t know how ABBA has contributed to world popular music. The temptation has been to treat ABBA as a comedy punch line rather than a serious musical group. ( e.g. Sweden’s credit rating has been downgraded from AAA to ABBA).

Let’s talk about choosing RRHF honorees. Creating any kind of sophisticated museum requires a thoughtful curatorial function which looks at historical context, examples of a type, and the individual importance of specific items. The Smithsonian Institution, for example, houses the Hope Diamond, the Apollo Space Capsule, the Wright Brother’s Airplane, and low rider cars from Espanola, N.M.. It also has the Orkin Insect Zoo and Archie Bunker’s chair from TV’s “All In the Family.” Are all of these equally important, and if not, how do you go about choosing? As Jim Henke, VP of the RRHF has said, “Our definition of rock ‘n’ roll is very broad. It’s not just skinny white guys who play guitar.” He adds rock and roll is not a sound it’s a culture. He is saying that when in doubt, the RRHF decides in favor of inclusiveness, just as they do at the Smithsonian.

I don’t want you to think that I am comparing ABBA with the cockroach collection at the Smithsonian. I do believe there are other strong arguments for ABBA’s being in the RRHF. Here are some:

- 1) The RRHF is a very inclusive “big tent.” The RRHF says its purpose is to “recognize the contributions of those who have had a significant impact on the evolution, development and perpetuation of rock and roll.” They have already included Mahalia Jackson, Billie Holiday, Pete Seeger, Nat “King” Cole and Johnny Cash, Pete Seeger, and Leadbelly. Adding ABBA to the RRHF does not seem wierd in that context.
- 2) Recent inductees have included Madonna, Elton John, the Bee Gees, Ricky Nelson, Joni Mitchell, Michael Jackson, Earth Wind and Fire and Billy Joel. From its very beginning the RRHF has picked performers from rap, reggae, disco, dance-pop, jazz, blues, country and R &B. ABBA’s dance-pop roots are not grounds for being excluded.
- 3) ABBA’s largest initial influence was not in the United States. But emphasizing ABBA’s pre

“Mamma Mia” impact misses a key point. Choosing ABBA is the RRHF’s way of honoring ABBA for helping make Rock and Roll music the world’s music. ABBA was the first non English speaking group to achieve global fame based on its interpretation of American rock music. It’s very hard to write a successful rock song in English. It is even harder to write rock music in Swedish, for a global English speaking audience.

4) There are many deserving performers and groups that have not yet been selected such as the Moody Blues, Cat Stevens, KISS, The Cure, and Alice Cooper. But that is not a principled basis for excluding ABBA. The others will get their chance in the years ahead. Michael says ABBA is not his musical cup of tea. But his personal preference, no matter how sophisticated or nuanced, is not a good reason for excluding ABBA from the RRHF. There have been over 700 people inducted into the RRHF since 1986. Should ABBA’s members be singled out to be cast into the outer darkness?

5) ABBA greatly influenced some of the most important groups of the 1970's and 1980's and has had undeniable lasting influence on alternative rock, dance music and power pop including the Spice Girls and Kylie Minogue. In addition, ABBA members personally produced Led Zeppelin, the Ramones, Genesis, Roxy Music, and the Beastie Boys. Recently Dave Grogh of the Foo Fighters said the group’s album “Wasting Light” drew inspiration from ABBA and their use of anthemic choruses.

6) Elvis Costello, Madonna, Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders have credited ABBA with influencing their music. In addition, Peter Townsend of the Who, Ray Davies of the Kinks, Kurt Cobain, U2 and John Lennon have claimed to be ABBA fans.

7) ABBA’s musical “Mama Mia” premiered in 1999 and is now the 10<sup>th</sup> longest running show on Broadway. It has been seen by 42 million persons and grossed 2 Billion dollars. In addition, ABBA had 14 top 40 hits in the US and 17 other countries. ABBA has cumulative worldwide album sales of more than 370 million copies. Only the Beatles and Elvis Presley exceed ABBA’s cumulative record sales. Is that an adequate measure of commercial success?

In summary, ABBA has had an extraordinary influence on the global music for more than 30 years. ABBA’s election to the RRHF in 2010 was entirely reasonable and well deserved. More so than potentially hundreds of other honorees. So let’s not argue further about ABBA’s induction three years ago. Let’s let’s turn our attentions to getting the Moody Blues and Cat Stevens into the RRHF.