

Arturo Gómez Quijano

**Case ABBA Forever!
From Waterloo to Voyage,
passing through
Mamma Mia!**

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There is a teacher's manual intended as a pedagogical complement.
It is available to teachers who use this document as teaching material.
editorial@esic.edu



April, 2024

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The author at ABBA The Museum in Stockholm
7th December 2023. Photo: C.M.-C.M.

Arturo Gómez Quijano

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*Original case by Professor **Arturo Gómez Quijano**, developed as a basis for class discussion and not as an illustrative example of a business process. The data used in this case is based on public information from reference companies obtained through their website and other sources of information. The characters and situations are real from public sources.*

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Introduction

ABBA: the soundtrack of my whole life

Why is ABBA suddenly appearing in our lives now? My sister-in-law asked me in a family reunion when I told her that I was writing a case of ABBA. Many people will think that the main reason is because I am an ABBA *freak*. Nothing could be further from the truth. The main reason is because it seems to me that we do have a lot to learn from Björn and Benny's career. One of the longest-lived and most productive creative couples in the history of music. They met on 5th June 1966 and, and they are still *active and successful today*.

However, my sister-in-law's question remained in my teacher's mind. In class I jokingly say that this is the question of José Mourinho, a famous football coach: *Why?* It is also the question of the researcher, the journalist, the academic, the businessperson. It is the question that drives us forward as human beings. Man seeks explanations. There are many businesses from which many things can be learned, but *why ABBA?*

It was then that I realized ABBA was *the soundtrack* that had been with me all my life. I was born in Galicia, in the Northwest of Spain, in the early sixties of the last century. From there, when I was just a child, I watched them, live and in black and white, win the *Eurovision Song Contest*. It was 1974. At that moment, ABBA was born. The group, designed by Stig Anderson, was formed after that triumph, to manage the success. For the next eight years they swept the world. They went as far as Australia where, when a special TV program about their visit to the country was broadcast, it had a 54% audience share, beating the record set by the broadcast of the man landing on the moon a few years earlier. *I saw them born.*

Just eight years, and only eight albums. Enough for a planetary success, to be played everywhere, to be remembered and hummed by millions of people all over the world. When that success seemed to be fading away, Judy Craymer appeared. A young Englishwoman, a production graduate, who wanted to have her own project. She thought, a few years later, that it was possible to write a story with the lyrics of some of ABBA's songs. A story that, since 1999, has been a box-office hit for twenty-five years. The same story that I danced alone once in New York and again in London with my family and, once again with my students and colleagues, many times in Madrid. The same story that moved us watching the film at home and that we always danced at weddings, parties, and farewells. *I saw them grow up.*

"We usually say no to everything", Ludvig Andersson confessed to me in an interview in London. Imagine you are the owner of the rights to ABBA. How many creatives, businessmen, artists, street vendors, travelling salesmen, hustlers... will pass by their offices every week, write every day in the mail, or approach them every time they meet them? But only occasionally, just sometimes, a great idea happens. Like Stig Anderson or Judy Craymer's ideas. Simon Fuller's idea struck them: Bringing ABBA back in concert, with digital technology, while the band members - who are no longer around for concerts - are in Stockholm walking the dog or cooking a Bolognese sauce? While I was excitedly waiting to be a grandfather in England, I went with my wife to see the *ABBA Voyage Show* in London. I couldn't believe it! 3,000 -real people- paying -real money- to dance and sing ABBA songs in a -real-concert with some -virtual- *ABBA*tars. 50 years after winning Eurovision! *I saw them grow old.*

I should talk to my sister-in-law again. Just to remind her that ABBA did not *suddenly* appear in our lives. What is striking and spectacular, what makes them unique is that ABBA was always in them. It never left our lives. That is the reason why I am writing this case. Because for fifty years, a group of Swedish singer-songwriters have conquered the world. Writing in a language that is not theirs. Telling simple stories of women, of love and heartbreak. Composing vibrant and catchy melodies, recording with multi-track arrangements on top of each other. In three emphatic stages: from Waterloo to Mamma Mia! From Mamma Mia! to Voyage. *I saw them become eternal.*

Arturo Gómez Quijano
Pozuelo de Alarcón, 14th February 2024.

1. ABBA ONE: 1974, Waterloo

Picture 1
PHOTO OF ABBA'S EUROVISION TRIUMPH, 6th APRIL 1974.
ABBA THE MUSEUM, STOCKHOLM



Photo: Arturo Gómez Quijano.

1.1. A child, in a Galician village, dreaming in black and white

When I was a child, in the 1970s, watching the *Eurovision Song Contest* on television was quite a ceremony. It was held on a Saturday in spring. For me, it was a holiday. Mum would let us watch TV late into the night. It was very exciting, because the voting was very long in that music competition. There was no fixed bedtime: we went to bed when it was over. The singers and groups represented countries so there was a national component which, more often than not, turned out to be a huge disappointment in the end. But it was certainly the big event, which we had been looking forward to for several weeks. At that time, there was not much entertainment. A single channel with programming limited to the afternoons and part of the evenings. In the morning there was no broadcasting. Everyone I knew was going to be watching the contest. If you didn't watch it, the next day you were left out of all conversations. You'd be kind of a freak. I didn't want to be the weird one.

We lived in my great-grandparents' summer house, which my father renovated. I loved the freedom of having so much land in that village, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. The downstairs part of the house was the public area, with the big living room, the dining room, the kitchen, and so on. My parents had an intense social life: the house was always full of people I didn't know. Our *sanctuary* was upstairs, the private area to which all those *invaders* had no access. There were our bedrooms and a small living room, where the children were sent, so as not to disturb them.

In this area, there was the TV cabinet, always locked. If we had permission, the doors would open. It was a window to the world. From that small village, in a corner of Spain, we could watch a burly reporter discover a village in the Amazon jungle; or a journalist explain a terrible war; or an anchorman connect live with another country, to show an invention that would change the world. That's when I decided I wanted to be a journalist, I wanted to see the world, I would go and visit those jungles and countries. That small device changed my life. It forced me to dream, even if it was in black and white.

I had never seen anything like this before. The band stood out from the rest, as they were dressed in glitter, shiny fabrics, heels, and impossible platforms, even the two men in the band! The guitar was shaped like a star. Everything seemed to indicate that they came from another planet. It was called Sweden. The conductor of the orchestra appeared disguised as Napoleon. But the best was yet to come. This song was nothing like the usual *Eurovision tunes*, cloying and predictable. It was different. They sang in English and told a story of a girl who had fallen for an insistent suitor. Like Napoleon at *Waterloo*. That day, 6th April 1974, I had seen, in black and white, from my village, the birth of a band that, I didn't know at the time, was to make up the soundtrack of my whole life. ABBA.

1.2. Stig Anderson and his idea: success can be created

What if we do all this the other way round? What if, with all that I have learned from producing the global successes in Sweden, we can make a design to conquer the world? At the end of the 1960s, Stig Anderson gradually began to see clearly which things needed to be done, what the reverse path was, in order to achieve global success from Sweden.

ABBA was the very popular brand name of a Swedish canned fish manufacturer.¹ Stig Anderson, *Stikkan* as his friends called him, was tired of putting the four names (Agnetha, Björn, Benny and Anni-Frid) on his memos and letters to them. So, he started writing ABBA at the top of the notes to the quartet. That's how Stig was: a creator.

In 1950, when he was only 19 years old, he had already published his first song. During that decade he wrote many others. At the end of the decade, he started to have some hits, also outside Sweden. His company, *Sweden Music*, was already

¹ The Swedish manufacturer gave them permission to use their name for the music group. The ABBA logo with the inverted first B was created by chance. At the photo shoot in Hamburg in February 1976, Benny was fiddling with his corporeal letter B and inadvertently turned it upside down. The official logo was designed by Rune Söderqvist that same year. Rune was the band's cover designer. "MAMMA MIA! How Can I Resist You? The Inside Story of Mamma Mia! and the Songs of ABBA", 2008, Andersson, B., Ulvaeus, B. & Craymer, J., Phoenix Illustrated, London, p.41. (10th August 2021).

the largest pop music publisher² in Scandinavia in the early 1960s. He soon saw the need to associate a record label with this publishing house. In 1963 he founded the legendary *Polar Music* recording studio with his friend Bengt Bernhag. "Records are the future"³ He was also a visionary.

One of Stig's best decisions was to start buying the rights to world music hits and producing them in Sweden. By doing this, during the 1960s, he learned many things: how to buy, produce, distribute, promote, and sell music in Sweden. He also learned that, many times, what was a worldwide success did not work in Sweden. He realized that behind every hit there was a structure, choruses, a bridge,⁴ lyrical cues, titles, which helped in its promotion. He understood that translating the songs was not enough, they had to be adapted, musically and culturally. He had to connect with the market, and for that he had to identify local talent to write, interpret, or play those adaptations. He discovered that studio recording was essential, to incorporate arrangements and effects, which turned the songs into something else. He recognized that promotion was essential to sell records. Stig learned the keys of the music business. He was a salesman.

His first studio contract was with the *West Bay Singers*, the Swedish folk music group of which Björn Ulvaeus was a member. In November 1963, after changing the name of the group to *Hootenanny Singers*, and incorporating modern arrangements into the recording, the first *single* was released. The first link between *Polar Music* and ABBA had been made. Radio, television, magazines, concerts, and retail outlets were the tools of musical promotion. At the end of one of those concerts, on 5th June 1966, Björn and Benny Andersson met, and spent the evening singing and playing *Beatles* songs together. Björn then introduced Benny to his producer, Stig. He quickly saw their talent and encouraged them to team up to write and release their first hits on the local market. One of the most successful musical couples in the history of music had just been born. For almost sixty years, Björn and Benny continue to work and innovate together. Stig was ready, after two decades of business in the music industry, to bring his enormous experience to these two young talents and, together, conquer the world.

1.3. A turning point: *Eurovision 1974*

Stig Anderson had it very clear: the *castle to storm* was *Eurovision*. That television festival, which had been born in 1956, was the perfect platform for the music diffusion to a huge European market. The cost was ridiculous compared to the benefit it could provide. There was only one problem: in Sweden, the choice to represent the country was made at another intermediate television festival: *Melodifestivalen*.⁵

² Stig "Stikkan" Anderson at: <https://www.polarmusicprize.org/about-the-prize> (last accessed 28/01/2024).

³ In: <https://abbasite.com/articles/in-focus-polar-music-the-story-of-abbas-record-label> (Last accessed 28/01/2024).

⁴ The *bridge* in a song is a transitional element that usually appears towards the middle of the song, or after two repetitions of the chorus. It is a turning point in the composition that is used to generate tension, transition, change, variety... On 25th January 1981, Stig's 50th birthday was celebrated, on this occasion ABBA, dressed as when they won *Eurovision*, recorded and sang a special song (and a video) dedicated to Stig, in which they humorously mentioned *sticket*, the *bridge* in a song, which was always referred to in the group's compositions. Palm, C.M. and Hanser, A. From ABBA to Mamma Mia! Premium Publishing, 2nd ed., Stockholm (2010), pp.116-117.

⁵ This festival is organized by the Swedish public broadcasters to choose Sweden's representative for the *Eurovision Song Contest*. <https://www.svtplay.se/genre/melodifestivalen>

In the late sixties, 1969, Benny submitted a song for this contest and came second. Stig encouraged Björn and Benny to continue writing songs for the Swedish public television contest. In 1971 their songs were rejected. In 1972, for Lena Andersson, they presented a ballad. It didn't win, but commercially it was a hit in Sweden. Stig and the songwriting couple were invited to participate in 1973. Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson, and their respective girlfriends, Agneta Fältskog and Anni-Frid Lyngstad, came third singing *Ring-Ring*. The visibility was enormous, and it was an unexpected success, both inside and outside Sweden. It was number 1 in several countries and made the charts in many others. Everything was ready. They were touching the sky with their fingers.

Picture 2

BJÖRN'S GUITAR AT EUROVISION. ABBA THE MUSEUM, STOCKHOLM

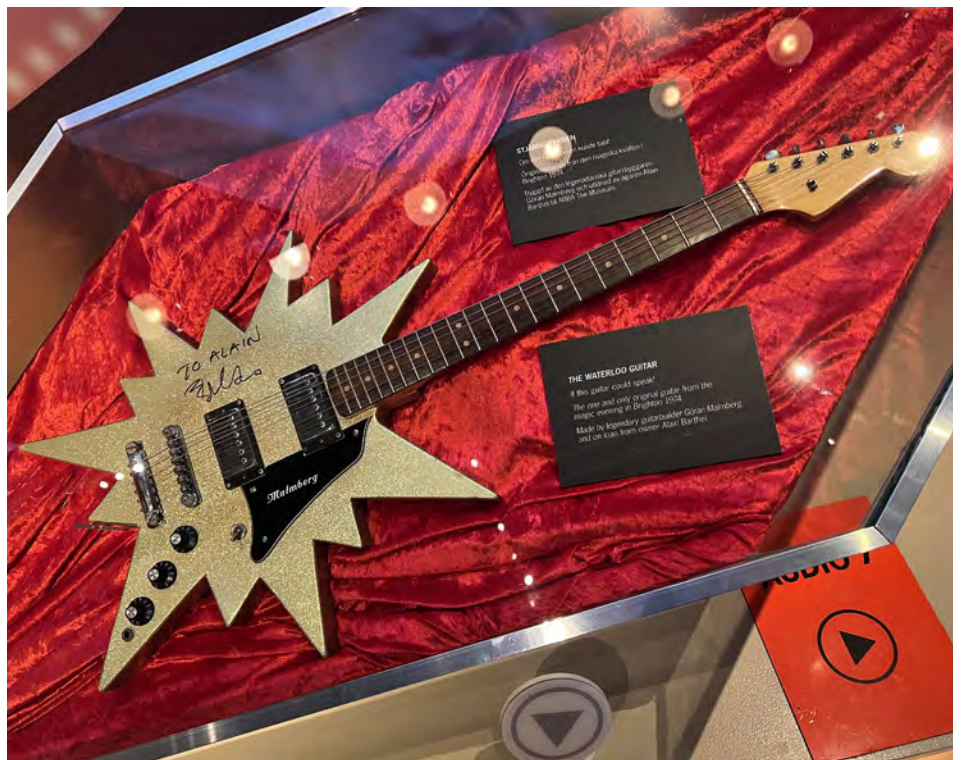


Photo: Arturo Gómez Quijano.

In 1974, Björn and Benny defeated Stig. The producer wanted to present the song *Hasta mañana* to the contest. He thought it was too *Eurovisiv*. The songwriting couple wanted *Waterloo*, for the opposite reason, and also because the four of them sang in it. Since 1970, when Bengt Bernhag had died prematurely, the two friends had assumed his job as producer, sharing his salary equally. Those years had given them a broader view of the market, and a different relationship with Stig. The song's lyrics, and the idea of comparing a girl's surrender to an insistent suitor to the battle Napoleon lost in 1815, were Stig's. A bright image, a different title, a different song. They decided to make the most of it and dress in the most striking way possible. Since then, their clothing has been part of ABBA's DNA.

After five years performing songs, they finally succeeded. On 9th February 1974, appearing for the first time under the name ABBA,⁶ they won the Swedish Radio and Television *Melodifestivalen* with *Waterloo*, the only song performed in English. That year the rules had been changed, and people with no musical training could be part of the jury. Within two months they would be representing Sweden at the *Eurovision Song Contest* in Brighton (UK), broadcasted by the BBC to the entire European broadcasting system. Whatever happened, the group and their song would be visible to the entire continental market.

The UK should not have hosted that *Eurovision*, but Luxembourg, which had won the previous Eurovision song contest.⁷ According to the rules, it should have been the host. But it had won two editions in a row and, due to financial problems, it resigned. The BBC immediately proposed itself as a substitute, aware of the image benefit that the European audience provided to the country. The voting system was also changed, which did not follow the order of participation. In many countries, votes were taken on the *dress rehearsal* rather than on the live performance. Another innovation was that in this edition, contestants were allowed to sing over their own recording, without having to play the music live, something that certainly benefited ABBA's powerful studio sound. Nothing would have been the same without all these changes. From then on, the UK would be forever linked to the history of the new group that had been born there: ABBA.

1.4. There is no project without a team

However, success was neither fortuitous nor immediate. Stig, who knew the music business inside out and had designed that strategy, had anticipated once again, and prepared the *Waterloo single*. In this way, the radio stations would have copies available immediately, and it could be played in all European countries, whether they won or not.⁸ They had already learned at *Melodifestivalen* that, even if they didn't win, they could be very commercially successful from the exposure that television gave them at the time. Participating in *Eurovision* gave them even more visibility, and a very easy entry into music radio stations, the usual way at that time to promote record sales.⁹ On 4th March 1974 they had recorded *Waterloo*, the first album under the name ABBA.

After winning, they began to receive offers to appear on TV shows. They cancelled a summer tour of Scandinavian folk music parks. They had to manage the success. They committed to an international tour at the end of the year, which didn't work out. They launched another single, *Waterloo-like*, which was also unsuccessful. It wasn't going to be easy. They also wanted to retire to write and compose in tranquility. Living in Stockholm, away from the big decision centers of the music industry and the media spotlight, was going to help them a lot in their career.

⁶ Until then they were not formally a group, but came together on occasion to record or sing songs. Their first album, *Ring Ring Ring* had been released in 1973 under the name "Björn & Benny, Agnetha & Anni-Frid". <https://abbasite.com/discography/>

⁷ <https://eurovision.tv/event/brighton-1974> (Last accessed 30/01/2024).

⁸ Those were different times: if the record was not physically available, music radio stations, even if they wanted to, could not play them. The business of the commercial music industry was necessarily based on the radio promotion of the new releases.

⁹ The usual pattern was appearance on a TV programme > airplay on radio station charts > point-of-sale promotion in record shops > and live concert tour.

The songs were initially written by Stig, who taught Björn and Benny what he had learned as a successful songwriter, as well as producing those songs that had triumphed in the world, and whose rights he had bought. Björn corrected some details in English, Benny was more concerned with the music. The lyrics were simple and emphatic. Writing in a language that is not your own forces you to simplify. That exercise was also one of the characteristics of the songs that worked, as Stig had tested. They were stories with a woman's voice, *insights*, universal truths told by a woman and sung by two women. Part of ABBA's personal brand.

These stories would evolve with the quartet, from love to heartbreak. After all, the group was formed out of the success of *Eurovision*, between two engaged couples: Björn and Agnetha, Benny and Anni-Frid. All four had had their separate careers, but success brings them together. They learn to sing together, to combine the two pairs of voices. There is a first stage of love songs, positive, luminous, brilliant. Then the heartbreak comes, the break-up, with sadder and more painful songs. Success will also separate them. The songwriting couple will remain, especially from 1977 onwards, when Stig stops writing songs, to become their *manager* and later to manage the huge business and the fortune they were generating.¹⁰

Besides Stig Anderson, there is another *fifth Beatle*¹¹ in ABBA. His name was Michael Tretow.¹² He was a sound engineer at *Polar Music* who had been introduced to the new *Wall-of-Sound* production formula created by Phil Spector. This technique consisted of superimposing different layers on the recording, duplicating vocals, adding instruments, backing vocals, arrangements, etc. There were ABBA songs that had up to 32 layers. It would give the group their distinctive sound, their personal trademark, and the strength of their rhythms, which make people dance as soon as their songs are played. By contrast, the difficulty of reproducing this in concert reinforced the criticism that the band was a studio group, which didn't work as well live. The arrangements that Michael Tretow added to the recordings were not to be found in any music score. Nobody wrote them. They were born out of multiple rehearsals in the studio, test and error. There were many other names, most of them Swedish, like Görel Hanser, vice-president of *Polar Music*; or publicist Rune Söderqvist, who designed the group's logo and many of the covers; Lasse Hallstrom¹³ who made the promotional videos and the film; and many others, musicians, choreographers, engineers, photographers, producers... They all felt part of a creative team where everyone could have a contribution to make.

1.5. One of the most successful pop groups of all times

First the business, then the company. ABBA is nothing but the consequence of its success. Telling a story. Understand how to build songs that will work. Incorporate the latest technological advances to give the recordings power and polish. Make the product available in the best formats in those target markets. Promote and make the songs visible on industry-friendly channels and with the highest

¹⁰ Palm, C.M. y Hanser, A. *From ABBA to Mamma Mia!* Premium Publishing, 2^a ed., Stockholm (2010), p.119.

¹¹ "The fifth Beatle" is an expression used by the music press that originally referred to those who at some points were part of that band or had a very special relationship. For example, Pete Best who was the original drummer of *The Beatles*. Or producer George Martin, or manager Brian Epstein. By extension it is used to refer to a shadow member of a musical group, with great influence on their work and successes.

¹² Ulvaeus, B. *Pop Story*, Fri Tanke, 2014. p. 38.

¹³ <https://abbasite.com/people/lasse-hallstrom/> (last consult 30/01/2024).

possible reach. Perform and sing live in the places where you have the largest audience, to generate unique experiences, stimulate the market, and work the myth.

When studying ABBA, the design of success always draws attention. Actually, ABBA is a stage of one of the most successful creative couples of all time, Björn and Benny. They did a lot of things before ABBA, quite successfully; then they did a lot of things after ABBA, very, very successfully. From 1973 to 1982, they write a new studio album every year (except 1978).¹⁴ Goals, discipline and creativity. As an omen, the group breaks up when in 1982 they are not able to record a new album. They will do so in 2021, with *Voyage*, in a surprising reunion. They also prove to be original in this respect. The group is reunited forty years after they split up.

Sales figures in the music industry have always lacked transparency. In addition to the general and self-interested confusion, there is now the difficulty of measuring this data in digital environments and platforms. Depending on the sources, different figures are obtained: from 200 to 400 million records sold. But there are many other figures that give an idea of the dimension of the phenomenon. For example, at any given time, ABBA is the most profitable company in Sweden without exception.¹⁵ Even more than Volvo. Not in volume, but in profits.¹⁶ Another indicator, the compilation released by *PolyGram* in 1992 when it bought *Polar Music: ABBA Gold: Greatest Hits*, is the first album to achieve 1,000 weeks in the top 100 of the official UK album charts.¹⁷ Three decades after its release, it remains the most profitable, ABBA's most successful album, and 20th in music history.¹⁸ It was released after the group had already disappeared. Because one of the characteristics of ABBA's music is that it is intergenerational. It is not very common for one generation to dance to the songs of their parents' generation.

Another ever-present element, a trademark from Stig Anderson's early days at *Polar Music*, is the promotion. ABBA was one of the first bands to incorporate small promoting films into their promotion, which the TV stations were happy to show. It was fresh and innovative content that audiences appreciated. They understood perfectly what the media needed and they gave it to them. Lasse Hallström directed most of those rudimentary promotional videos, being ahead of their time. Later on, video clips would become a standard for promoting record sales.¹⁹ He also directed *ABBA-The Movie* in 1977. These audiovisual pieces allowed ABBA to conquer markets as different as Australia, or the Soviet Union, where they were paid by barter, with raw materials.²⁰

After promotion and distribution, the bestsellers arrived. With record purchases, compilation albums of hits were promoted, starting early in Australia. The vari-

¹⁴ 1973: Ring Ring Ring; 1974: Waterloo; 1975: ABBA; 1976: Arrival; 1977: The Album; 1979: Voulez-Vous; 1980: Super Trouper; 1981: The Visitors. Then, in 2021: Voyage.

¹⁵ Fleisher, F. "ABBA operates the most profitable Swedish company". *Variety*, New York, 31st August 1977. http://www.abbaomnibus.net/years/articles/variety_31081977.htm (last accessed 11th August 2021).

¹⁶ <https://abbasite.com/articles/in-focus-polar-music-the-story-of-abbas-record-label/> (last accessed 31/01/2024).

¹⁷ <https://www.billboard.com/pro/abba-gold-record-1000-weeks-uk-chart/> (last accessed 30/01/2024).

¹⁸ According to *Mediatraffic* it is the 20th most successful album in music history with 30 million records sold, between *Pink Floyd the Wall* (19th) and *Queen Greatest Hits* (21st). <http://www.mediatraffic.de/alltime-album-chart.htm> (Last accessed 09/02/2024).

¹⁹ Perhaps among the best is *Michael Jackson's Thriller* (1983). A revolutionary music video-film at the time, it mythologized Jackson, and made the album *Thriller* the best-selling album of all time.

²⁰ Szu Ping Chan, 'Pepsi in exchange for Soviet warships: how barter has dominated trade throughout history', *BBC.com*, 15th June 2019. At: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-48629860> (Last accessed 28/10/2021).

ous regional record labels, which had ABBA in their repertoire, copied this strategy. The cherry on top of the whole circuit was the concerts. Between 1974-1975 there was a two-phase tour of European and then Nordic countries. In 1977 there was another tour of Europe and Australia. In 1979 the tour took them to North America and Europe. The last one, in 1980, visited Japan. In the United States, where it is so difficult for foreign music to succeed, ABBA managed to get 20 of their songs on Billboard's Hot 100 chart.²¹ As Stig Anderson had once dreamed, a small group of Swedish conquered the world.

2. ABBA TWO: 1999, Mamma Mia!

Picture 3

PROMOTIONAL POSTER WITH THE IMAGE OF THE MUSICAL MAMMA MIA!

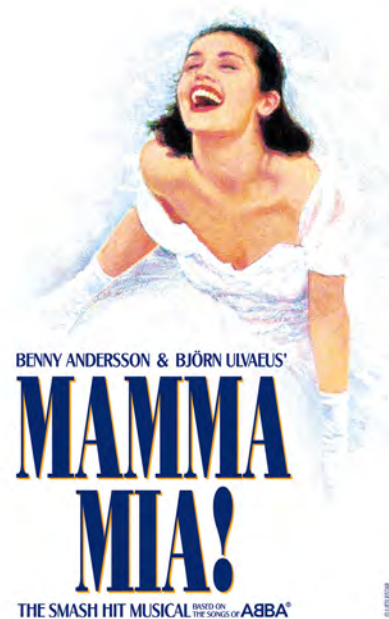


Photo: Littlestar Services.

2.1. A professor dancing in Broadway

My professional life has been very diverse. I am a journalist by training and a communicator by profession. I am also an entrepreneur by vocation and family tradition. I have done many different things. I have always liked to take advantage of business trips to get to know better the cities and countries where I have to go. The concept is called *bleisure*, the combination of *business* and *pleasure*. Someone pays you to do something in a place, and you extend your stay on your own, and do some sightseeing. For a little more money, you get a trip that would be much more expensive if you wanted to do it yourself, and that you might never do it yourself.

²¹ <https://www.billboard.com/artist/abba/chart-history/hsi/> (Last accessed on 11/02/2024).