

At the end of the film *Mamma Mia!*, as the credits roll and the song *Thank You For The Music* blasts a final tribute, Björn Ulvaeus makes a cameo appearance as a Greek god showering mortals with gold dust. It's a fitting image; as one half of the songwriting partnership behind ABBA – probably the most successful pop group of all time – Ulvaeus is regarded with awe by pundits of popular culture and anyone, basically, who has ever used a hairbrush as a microphone. The fact that he's still around, still wielding his Midas touch some 30-odd years on, is indeed rather miraculous.

"Ha-ha." Ulvaeus's eyes twinkle behind his fashion forward glasses. "Yes, that cameo came very naturally," says the 63-year-old Swede, sitting upright on a sofa in a central London hotel in a bespoke grey suit and patterned tie. "Benny [Andersson] was a mere Greek fisherman, playing a bit of piano during *Dancing Queen*. I got to strum a lyre and float on a cloud." He sighs good-naturedly.

Mamma Mia!, of course, is the smash-hit screen adaptation of the smash-hit stage show based on the songs of ABBA. It tells of a young bride-to-be (Amanda Seyfried) who is living on a mythical Greek island with her ex-hippie mum (Meryl Streep) and trying to figure out who among Pierce Brosnan, Colin Firth and Swedish heartthrob Stellan Skarsgård is her father. The songs drive the narrative along, Bollywood-style; anthems such as *Does Your Mother Know* and *Money, Money, Money* spark the sort of OTT exuberance among the cast that ABBA did in their brief (1972–82) but hit-filled heyday.

Ulvaeus is in London to promote the DVD release of this delightfully daggy comedy, a hen-night-in-a-box that he and Andersson executive-produced and is now one of the highest-earning film musicals ever. Tomorrow night he's off to the British National Movie Awards to accept the gong for Best Musical from Nicole Kidman. ("This is very emotional for me, getting this fantastic prize from an Australian lady here in the UK," he'll say, looking more diminutive than ever next to the statuesque actor. "The two countries, more than any other countries, which have taken ABBA to their hearts.")

"In the beginning," he says now, "Australia was very important to us. Our success there alerted Britain and then the rest of the world caught on." After winning the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest with *Waterloo*, ABBA was expected to vanish into obscurity. They nearly did: Britain seemed to decide that the image of Ulvaeus at Eurovision ("I wore a black jacket with pearls and satin trousers tucked into silver boots and looked like a fat Christmas tree") was best blocked out. Australians, however, threw their heads back and sang along.

It was the 1975 single *Mamma Mia* that first grabbed our attention. Back then we were listening to prog rock and toying with homegrown punk; the arrival of four jolly Swedes (OK, three; Frida was Norwegian) singing catchy tunes and wearing matching jumpsuits was either appalling, enthralling or both. Suddenly there they were each week on

Countdown: blonde Agnetha Fältskog and brunette Frida Lyngstad, mouthing "My my, how can I resist you" in alternating close-ups. Inspiring a thousand school recess routines and making innumerable blokes (and a few girls) swoon.

Which one you fancied said something about who you were. The sexy blonde one was a bit obvious. The brunette had hidden depths. No one fancied the guys: bear-like Benny on keyboards; pixie-ish Björn on guitar. "The girls gave us glamour, that's for sure," agrees Ulvaeus, who was married to Fältskog at the time. ("I'm quite superficial," he quips.)

He and Andersson had met in 1966 and started writing songs together, bringing in their wives as occasional backing vocalists. In the early '70s they hit on a win-win formula – memorable melodies, simple but telling lyrics, a "wall of sound" achieved by overdubbing the female singers' voices in multiple harmonies – and ABBA was born. For the next decade, for six hours each weekday, Andersson and Ulvaeus churned out song after song, the former composing the music, the latter writing the lyrics. Both of them

MINING ABBA GOLD

This year's hit film *Mamma Mia!* has put Björn Ulvaeus back in the spotlight, 30 years after Abba's heyday. So, asks Jane Cornwell, any chance of a band reunion?

hammering away until something came. "I'm resigned to the fact that every songwriter has a period in his life when he's most creative," says Ulvaeus, when asked if he tires of constantly looking backwards. "Benny and I suddenly had the right vehicle. We had written for other people before but we suddenly realised that, hey, you know what? These are our wives and they are wonderful singers and we sound great together. Then we just, you know, burst out."

ABBA visited Australia only once, in 1977. The ensuing hysteria was captured on *ABBA: The Movie*, a documentary led by the man behind their promo-clips, Swedish film director Lasse Hallström. "It was a bit much, I think," Ulvaeus sips his coffee. "But then it was never easy for the girls. Sometimes it was even a little bit dangerous, because you could be cornered."

When the band split they all thought that was that. Andersson and Ulvaeus, who had both remarried, went off to write the patchy stage musical *Chess* with Tim Rice. The women started solo careers that didn't quite take off. Fältskog was rumoured to have become

a recluse after a series of failed love affairs ("Not true!" says Ulvaeus. "She just hates travelling!"). Lyngstad sang on her ex-husband's album and threw herself into charity work.

But ABBA burst back. Their revival at the end of the '80s was spontaneous and, as momentum built, swift: popsters Erasure released their ABBA-esque LP. Tribute band Bjorn Again was founded. Compilation album *ABBA Gold* topped the charts. In the mid-'90s Australian films *Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert* came drenched with ABBA soundtracks. In 1997, Andersson and Ulvaeus agreed that their songs could be used for a London West End musical; there are now nine productions of *Mamma Mia!* in different countries including, of course, Australia.

The pair were involved in this year's film from the beginning: "We knew Meryl Streep could sing but we didn't know she could sing that well," says Ulvaeus. "All of a sudden the lyrics took on something new, went a step further than ever before." But what of Pierce Brosnan, whose vocals one critic likened to that of a wounded water buffalo? Ulvaeus grins. "No! It's not true! He is Bruce Springsteen ... Tom Waits! We loved that kind of Irish folkie quality."

It's been a long time coming – Ulvaeus returned to Melbourne in 2001 to oversee final auditions for the stage show – but he is finally at the end of the long and hectic *Mamma Mia!* (the musical and the film) period. "Something else is on the way," he says. It's not the musical *Kristina*, which he and Andersson co-wrote in Swedish and plan to introduce to America, in English, next autumn. "Something else..." he muses. "I just don't know what it is yet."

In the meantime he's happy at home in Stockholm, Sweden, in the house he shares with his wife, journalist Lena Kallersjö, not too far from the houses of their two children and the two children from his marriage to Fältskog. "I've got three grandchildren aged from eight to seven months and I see them often, which is wonderful. Though I still feel too young to be a grandfather. Physically I'm very well. Mentally I cannot understand that I am 63. When I think about it, yes I am. But then again..." He looks incredulous. "No, I'm not."

Ulvaeus seems to have moved smoothly – and dapperly – into his senior years. Was there a mid-life crisis along the way? He shakes his head. "I'm aware that my time is more limited but if I want to, say, go climbing in the mountains I do. I run and I love it. I have my intellectual passions." An active member of the Swedish Humanist Association, Ulvaeus has a stake in an independent publishing company that translates books from English to Swedish in "the spirit of enlightenment".

As for an ABBA reunion, forget it. "It's so silly when old bands go back on the road. Isn't it better to listen to the records, watch the videos and remember us as we were?" The songs sound just as good as they ever did, he says, because they were created with care, craftsmanship and sincerity. It's for these reasons that people come up to him in the street or the supermarket ("I decided long ago that if I wanted to push a trolley around, I would") to shake his hand and thank him, sincerely, for the music.

Thank you for the music, I say. Ulvaeus stands and bows. "Thank you," says this most affable of deities, "for the interview." ●

Mamma Mia! is released on DVD on November 6.



Ulvæus, 63, recalls of his Abba days: "I wore a black jacket with pearls and satin trousers tucked into silver boots and looked like a fat Christmas tree."