

Since the late Sixties, George Baker has been the leading force behind the Dutch hit group George Baker Selection and is responsible for numerous hits and two irrefutable world classics, Little Green Bag and Paloma Blanca, with the latter selling more than seven million copies, making it one of the most successful Dutch singles ever. The band has released twelve albums and several compilation albums and sold over 20 million records worldwide. These days, George still performs as a solo artist and occasionally as a special guest of the Reservoir Dogs Band. George enthusiastically accepted my invitation to talk about ABBA; after all, their career was peaking at a time when the George Baker Selection was also enjoying success across the world. I talked with George in a small but cosy café, prior to a well-attended open-air gig in the north of Holland.

What is the best quality of ABBA's music?

ABBA is, of course, an institution, with two exceptionally talented singers and two exceptionally talented songwriters. Add to this their own unique sound which is their most important asset. Their sound is instantly recognisable.

You also succeeded in creating your own sound.

Look, I think for an artist that's the most important achievement - that the sound is recognisable straight away, that people after one minute can say, "Oh yes, this is ABBA, this is George Baker," or whoever. That's always the best.

Does this happen naturally or is it carefully planned?

Well, it is something that has to grow gradually. I started making music when I was about 12 years old. At that time, I didn't have my own sound at all. I sang everything by Elvis Presley, Little Richard or Jerry Lee Lewis. My own sound was still a long way off. That came later. At a certain point, I became part of a soul band and had also been in contact with record companies. In those days, you auditioned for local record labels. You went there and started playing your guitar and sang. In my case, those record label people thought it was all quite wonderful but not very original. They were right. I realised that if I wanted to make it in this profession, it could only come true with a completely original, personal sound. It finally happened when I got together with our bass player Jan Visser who always played the start loop of what would become Little Green Bag to warm up his fingers. One night, we were sitting together in a school room and while the other guys were rehearsing, we made an attempt to see if we could succeed in nailing a song together, which became Little Green Bag. From that point onwards, the creation of our own

sound started to take form.

When that song became a worldwide hit, did you believe your sound was cemented for the future?

As a matter of fact, I didn't. The second record, Dear Ann, was something completely different; it was a record featuring an accordion and violins, country-like, bayou-like music. That's the sound I wanted in that case. I didn't want a record that resembled the previous one.

Was it a strain to follow up a worldwide hit?

Luckily, for me, it wasn't. I didn't think about it that way in those days, but I wouldn't have had a clue, either. On the other hand, in my head I had three or four possible formulas so to speak, also sound-wise, with which I wanted to continue. One type is not enough, you just need some more variation. That was the plan. But that the plan would be a successful one, that was merely a wild guess. Of course, after our first song had become a worldwide hit, the second record benefited from some extra attention.

But the singles were chosen spontaneously based on your own taste?

Yes, they were. We didn't have any target groups in mind. It was still the rock and roll way in that sense.

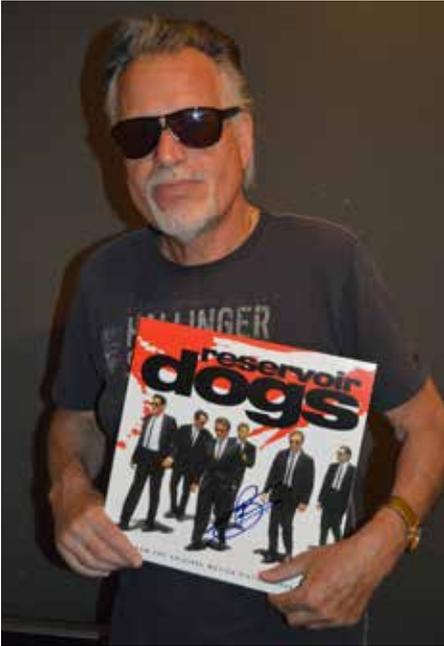
Having gone through your back catalogue recently, I realised that you used a lot of instruments that were unconventional in pop music, just like ABBA did: flutes, accordion...

All combined with electric and bass guitars, this kind of approach. I was raised by my grandma and grandpa, together with my mother and an uncle who also shared our house. My mother and grandmother loved operettas and folk music that was popular in those days, but my uncle possessed piles of jazz records, all by bands from the early Twenties until the mid Fifties. He played all those records to me. In my head, it all became a gigantic melting pot; I followed and became familiar with all the genres. All those elements, in one way or another, reappeared when I started making music. Look, those flutes and mandolins originated from old Italian music, but the beats came from rock and roll. That's how it all happened, in fact.

The different influences were also ABBA's strong point when it came to creating their unique sound.

Absolutely. With ABBA, later on, it became more homogenous but when they started out, they touched upon a big variety of styles in their songs. Songs such as Ring, Ring and Fernando are quite far removed from each other, but both songs were very good and very interesting - and very appealing.

Does this phase of ABBA's career appeal



the most to you?

No, not really, but I clearly noticed the evolution, the natural evolution of their skills. Intrinsicly, the boys were already good musicians, but they got better and better. The ladies were very good singers, but they responded more and more to each other, and it got better and better. Because of all that, their music reached a higher level. I understood that.

Being an artist yourself, you also experienced ABBA performing close up?

I saw and heard ABBA for the first time at *Musikladen*, the German ARD show directed by Michael Leckebusch in Bremen. We were there to promote one of our songs in Germany. The show was fun to do because you always had to play live, which was a bonus. So I heard ABBA live there with Waterloo. All big names came to this show: Elton John, Dire Straits, who also showcased their first record there, and so on. At the time, ABBA were not really world-famous, but hearing them and also noticing the specific look of the two girls, with the two boys in the background so to speak, I realised right away their enormous potential. To me, the singing was as clear as a bell.

Did you talk to them?

There was not that much communication amongst artists, really. Every artist kind of stayed in their own bubble. Each artist had a team of people around them, and so it was not that easy to talk to them - unless you were staying at the same hotel and hanging out in the bar in the evening.

ABBA surely must have been aware of

your success and music?

Stig Anderson of Polar Music was my publisher in Scandinavia. The contacts were made through my Dutch publisher. I've always thought this is a rather enjoyable fact (*smiles*). And even better, at home, I have a rehearsal tape of ABBA, on which you can hear them play Paloma Blanca. That's very special, really nice!

It also proves that if you have written a true classic, at a certain point the song starts transcending its composer(s).

Every song that becomes a big hit transcends your own initial idea of that song, the reason being that everyone who has heard the song or has bought the record has his own memories attached to it. That song is no longer yours, it is the property of the public. And what the audience sees in it, that's where the truth lies. You can have your own specific idea about a song, but if the public decides to start dancing a polonaise on it so to speak, you have to accept their feelings. That's how it works.

But initially Paloma Blanca is a song about freedom?

(*nods*) It is a song about freedom. The novel by Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, is the true story about Gary Gilmore, a hardened criminal who had committed all sins that God forbade. He was sentenced to death and thought it was right, he didn't want any mercy. He was on death row and thought that he got the punishment he deserved and was done with it. He would be gassed or given an injection, and was transported to the place of execution. So he stepped onto the bus surrounded by guards, the driver put the engine on, and what comes out of the radio? Una Paloma Blanca! Unfortunately not our version but still our song.

The driver thought, this man won't be in the mood for a happy song, and so he asks Gary, "Shall I turn off the radio?"

"No," he answered, "because this song is the story of my life."

That's something you can't make up the moment you're writing the song. It has a completely different impact afterwards. And there are even more stories like that one.

Is Paloma Blanca also one of your favourites, or are there other songs you prefer from your back catalogue?

It's impossible to choose because I've written them all myself. They are all equally precious to me. It just happens that some of them have become bigger 'children' than others. But on my own chart, I have a song that's second on the list, Fly Away Little Paraquayo.

Because of the lyric (Fly Away Little Paraquayo is about child labour and slavery)?

Yes. I prefer songs that tell a story. Having said that, I experienced that, in most cases, people have deaf ears as far as the true meaning of the lyric is concerned when they sing along, except if your name is Dylan (*laughs*).

The song Little Green Bag got a new lease of life thanks to Quentin Tarantino's film Reservoir Dogs. How did this happen, did you get a phone call one day?

That's how it happened indeed (*laughs*)! It was 1992, I got a phone call from a publisher, and he said, "Little Green Bag is used in a film by..." and then he had to think for a while, "a certain Quentin Tarantino." Nobody had heard of him at the time. "And the film is called *Reservoir Dogs*."

"That's great," I said, "send me the film when it is finished and the time is right." Time went by and, in 1994, Tarantino made *Pulp Fiction*. In the wake of *Pulp Fiction*, there was a renewed interest in *Reservoir Dogs*, initially a cult film and a mega blockbuster hit in Japan. Following that, the song was used for a San Torini whisky commercial, I don't know if it's drinkable, but that's another story. That's how it became a Top 10 hit, and soon the wind blew it over to Europe, until someone woke up and said, "But hey, that's our own George Baker from the Netherlands!" That's how the whole story unfolded for the second time for me. I got a hit again with the first song that I'd ever written. That record means so much more to me than being another hit single. A second lease of life, a second story is attached to it.

You also perform with the Reservoir Dogs Band.

It wasn't really planned, but those guys really play all the music from the Tarantino films, and they're doing a damn good job. One day, I got a Facebook message from the band's lead singer, asking, "Would you like to perform with us when the occasion arises?"

I had a look on the internet to see what this was all about and thought, why not? And just for fun I did a concert with them performing three songs. From then on, I performed regularly with them as a guest artist. What I do with them is completely different from what I usually do. The only song of my own that I perform is Little Green Bag, and the other songs are a mix of rock classics, jazz music, blues and country. For me, it became sort of an outlet. If you only perform your own stuff, it's normal to long to do something else for a change if you get the chance, so, for me, it's always a party.

How do you like the Tarantino movies?

After watching *Reservoir Dogs*, I thought it looked similar to the B-movies I had watched when I was 15 years old, in the local cinema on Sunday afternoon (*smiles*). But I found out there was a deeper layer. Tarantino drew a lot of his inspiration from Martin Scorsese. He has done some great films, but he has also done films that don't touch me. I suppose that goes for each filmmaker or favourite writer for that matter, there are always pieces where you think, I'd rather not.

Do you have a favourite ABBA song?

The song to which many happy memories

are attached is Waterloo because of the German connection with *Musikladen*, when they had their first big success. I also met them on other TV shows where they also performed Waterloo. Chiquitita is another very good song and Dancing Queen. I'm not saying that I like them all, but musically the songs are so well-constructed. I hear no elements where I feel they don't fit. Everything that's in there is justified. They all had had musical experience before that, that's obvious - Benny with the Hep Stars, and so on. They knew what they were doing, they were professionals, and you could hear that in their music.

A great part of ABBA's success relied on Agnetha and Frida's vocals and the multi-layering of their voices, also in the backing vocals. You also put a lot of effort in recording the female (backing) vocals.

Absolutely. It was part of the sound. A male solo singer is fine, but if you add a few ladies it gets even better, and you appeal to a larger audience at the same time. But it was not calculated. At a certain point we needed someone who could sing the second voice, so a female singer joined us. Since then I started writing in a somewhat different formula, I clearly saw the potential. My writing changed in that it became accessible for a larger audience. Until 1972 we sold very few albums, we were a real 'singles' group. Until the album *Hot Baker* on which we were joined by girls, added with flutes, mandolins and the whole circus. All of a sudden this started to sell.

As discussed, your music was used in movies, but would you support a musical concept that integrated your biggest hits, just as *Mamma Mia!* did with ABBA's back catalogue?

As it happens, Paloma Blanca will be used in a Dutch musical, *Vamos!*. If it is well done, I would support a complete musical.

Did you see *Mamma Mia!*?

No, I didn't. I'm not really into musicals. The storylines are mostly rather weak, in my opinion.

Just like you, the individual ABBA members are still active, but do you think it was wise of them never to reunite on stage for a concert?

I think this was a wise decision. This way, the legend lives on. Everybody still imagines ABBA as they were when they were young. For the money they shouldn't do it, they would need an absolute musical urge to bring the whole gang together. But I think the four of them did everything they could do as a foursome during their time. And for the fans it's equally fine. They can keep that particular image in their head, "This is how they looked, you know". That's the memory and one shouldn't alter that. I think ABBA have thought this through very well.

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH