

Today guest-edited by Björn Ulvaeus
Friday 30 December 6.00am **Radio 4**

B

JÖRN ULVAEUS HAS sold more than 150 million records, written two hit musicals, co-produced a pair of Greek Island-set inter-generational romance movies

you may have heard of and, in the UK alone, had nine number one singles. Among those hits are a good chunk of the songs you've been singing along to tipsily, perhaps even tearfully, at Christmas parties over the last month. You know them: *Mamma Mia*; *Knowing Me, Knowing You*; *The Winner Takes It All*, Abba's mini masterpieces of relationship regret that echoed our own ill-fated love affairs, giving the heartbreak of being dumped by Lynne in accounts or Steve at the building society an ennobling Nordic lustre. They still do.

"It's amazing," Björn tells me in the back of a limousine driving him through the winter streets of Stockholm. "That's all I can say. I can't explain why Abba has survived and stayed relevant. People often come up to me and say, 'You don't know what your music has meant to me through the years, the ups and downs.'"

Björn is 77, but here in the darkened interior of the limo, he looks at least a decade younger. "I don't feel like an old man in my head," he says. "I'm lucky not to have health problems. I feel full of life, energy and curiosity."

He appears younger still in the stage show *Abba Voyage*, where he appears as an avatar alongside fellow Abba members Benny Andersson, Anni-Frid (Frida) Lyngstad and his ex-wife Agnetha Fältskog (Andersson and Lyngstad were also married, but divorced in 1981). The AI-generated show uses motion-capture technology developed by Disney's Industrial Light and Magic to trap all four in the golden amber of their mid-30s greatness.

It opened in London last May to universal acclaim: "Mind-blowing," gasped *The Daily Telegraph*; "Out of this world," purred *The Times*. And then, in November, the band was nominated for four Grammys for the 2021 comeback album *Voyage*. "This year has been momentous in so many ways," Björn ponders and shakes his head. "That I should experience something like that at this point in my life?"

There's more. In February, Björn separated from his second wife, Lena Källersjö, after 41 years of marriage, and began a relationship with 49-year-old Christina Sas. His new partner will be joining the family this Christmas Eve – "in Sweden, Christmas Eve is the big celebra-

tion," he explains – as will Agnetha. "Yes, Agnetha will be there, my new partner and the whole family; four children, nine grandchildren – all in my eldest daughter's house. We will have a huge dinner with lots of food and laughter."

I don't ask if Källersjö will be there. Everything seems so complicated and, well, Swedish. The food certainly will be. "We'll eat a lot of marinated herring," he says. "Roughly the same thing we eat on Midsummer and Easter." And music? "Oh yes, there will be songs."

THEN, TO END the year, he will guest-edit Radio 4's *Today* programme on 30 December – an honour previously bestowed upon Yoko Ono, Raheem Sterling and Stephen Hawking. Famously, Hawking's work explained how time and space work; Björn has actually reversed time, and other famous seniors have noticed. "I know Barry Gibb has been to see it," Björn says of *Abba Voyage*. "I hear rumours about Metallica.

Björn again!

After a momentous year in which Abba reappeared as avatars, Björn Ulvaeus opens up about fame, guest-editing *Today* and having Agnetha round for herring...

INTERVIEW BY
MICHAEL HODGES



I don't think Mick Jagger has been yet, but he has said something about it. Cher was going. So many of my contemporaries are now thinking 'Is there a way we can do it?'

There are plans for more *Abba Voyages*. To that end, Björn was in Singapore recently (he fronts Abba's projects; the more retiring Benny keeps busy with his own band). Eventually

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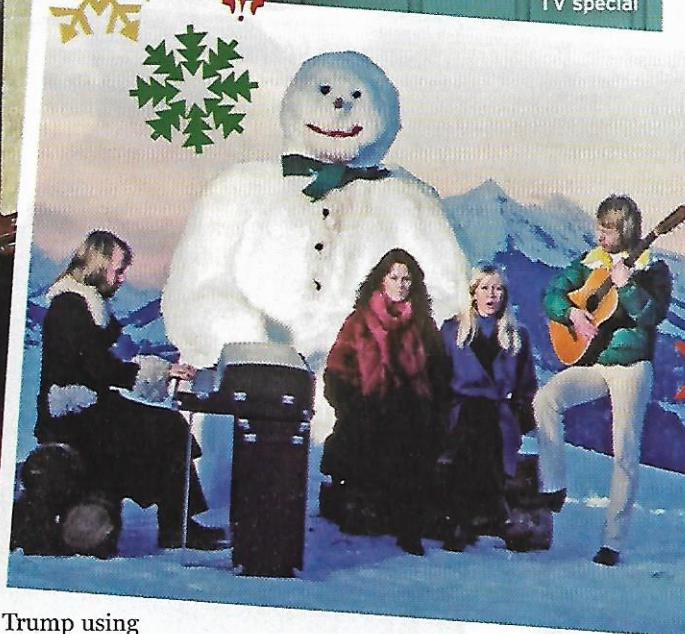
millions might see his avatar, but what is it like for him? "People say, 'Whoa! How do you feel?' But it's not weird for me any more. I've been exposed to my younger self almost daily for 40 years." And if he could talk to that younger self rather than watch an AI version of him? "I'd say 'Don't be so nervous about everything!'"

Yet many things worry Björn now. The



HERE HE GOES AGAIN

Björn Ulvæus has turned back the clock with the stage show *Abba Voyage* (inset left) Below: Abba filming the 1979 *Snowtime* TV special



prospect, for instance, of Donald Trump using Abba songs in his campaigns. Has he? "I think he has, I can't remember. It was probably *The Winner Takes It All*." Not a great success, then. "He's totally misunderstood it. Thank God it didn't work."

His concerns about threats to democracy are pertinent in Sweden where, following September's elections, the far-right Sweden Democrats joined the coalition government. "I mourn that trust in the democratic institutions is declining, and the trust of the citizens of Sweden in each other is also declining. And it's like that everywhere else in the world. It seems to me trust is never going to come back."

Björn's deeper fears become apparent when I ask about the Christmases in the old social democratic Sweden of his boyhood. "I remember Christmas in the late 50s and early 60s, when the future was incredibly bright. Some people say that [era] was the peak of humanity, at least in Western democracies. That's very different from celebrating Christmas now when

there is such darkness on the horizon – the fear of the US becoming an autocracy, climate change, war."

THE WAR IN Ukraine has now elevated the Eurovision Song Contest, where his own fortunes took off when Abba won with *Waterloo* in 1974, into a geopolitical event. Will Björn be coming to Liverpool in 2023? "I haven't decided, but I hope that it unites Europe behind Ukraine. Eurovision may seem shallow and just for fun, but there is a deeper meaning to it. For those hours that it is on, Europe is unified. I like that about Eurovision, and I like the fact that it's songs, it's music, that can unite us."

Even in Britain, which has never taken Eurovision that seriously? "Terry Wogan and all that?" he laughs. "Well, you can't take it *too* seriously. I think Terry Wogan was very funny sometimes. But why not send your best songs?

Why not make an effort? I think the UK is doing that now, finally. And I'm glad."

Björn says he's excited about using Radio 4 journalists to interview "prime ministers and presidents" when he edits *Today*, but doesn't he already have a massive worldwide audience? Why not write some songs about politics? "I tried," he reveals. "In Sweden in the 70s, there was a niche movement called the Progressives; they were so annoyed with us because they said that we never wrote about politics, and all songs should be about politics! So I wrote lyrics that were more politically skewed, but they were so boring."

So there's an album's worth of boring left-wing Abba songs. Where are they? "In the wastepaper basket. They were no good. We wanted to touch people, to move people, and I found it much more interesting to explore relationships than party politics."

It was the often-fraught nature of his relationship with Agnetha that gave those songs their great power. Now they share plates of marinated herring together, how will he write? "There are other relationships," he says. "So many still to explore. You don't ever stop writing songs. You do it until you die."

Christmas on Today

Today's guest editors and the subjects they will focus on

IAN BOTHAM *Boxing Day*

The former cricketer looks at advances in treating childhood leukaemia.

JAMIE OLIVER *Tue 27 Dec*

The chef on improving child health.

NAZANIN ZAGHARI-RATCLIFFE *28 Dec*

The British-Iranian national (below) who was detained in Iran will explore freedom.

SIR JEREMY FLEMING *Thu 29 Dec*

The director of GCHQ looks at data opportunities – and risks.

BJÖRN ULVÆUS *Fri 30 Dec*

The Abba legend addresses Europe's future.

ANNE-MARIE IMAFIDON

New Year's Eve

The technologist on science, problem-solving – and comedy.

DAME SHARON WHITE

Mon 2 Jan

The chair of John Lewis on helping young people in the care system.

