SWEDISH
POP
EXPORTS
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SWEDEN – ONE OF THE LEADING POP-MUSIC NATIONS TODAY
Swedish songwriters and producers are powering the biggest performers in the world. During 2014, 25 per cent of the No.1 hits on the American Billboard pop chart were written by Swedes.

When Katy Perry performed at the Super Bowl in January 2015, the first five songs she performed were written by Sweden’s Max Martin. (The sixth and final song was Norwegian.)

HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE?

The fact that a peripheral, out-of-the-way country like Sweden – with an obscure language understood by nobody outside the Nordic region – could take such a position in the English-speaking music world is as unlikely as Albania or Uruguay doing it.

The story of Swedish pop exports starts with ABBA. The super group was a phenomenon, demonstrating for coming generations of Swedish musicians that it was possible to come from Sweden and achieve international success.

There are numerous Swedish songwriters among the most-travelled people in the world. A great many Swedish school students travel on language trips, through companies such as EF.

On several occasions during the 2010s, half the songs on the US Top-10 list have been written by Swedes.

Swedish pop in the 2010s is dominated by women: Tove Lo, Robyn, Lykke Li, Seinabo Sey, First Aid Kit, Say Lou Lou… the list could be three times as long.

When it comes to songwriters and producers, men are in the majority, but women are making inroads there too. There are numerous Swedish songwriters among the best in the world today.

CAUSES

How could little Sweden have such a huge influence on contemporary popular culture?

One reason is the country’s diminutive size. The domestic market is so small that for most professions, it is essential to have contacts outside the country. It is therefore natural that everyone speaks at least one other language.

Just about all Swedes speak English. In contrast to other European countries such as Italy, Spain and Germany, Sweden does not dub English-language television series and films: as a result, Swedes hear English spoken every day. Younger Swedes who grew up with the internet, computers, computer games and music – where English predominates – can be said to be bilingual.

Swedes are also among the most-travelled people in the world. A great many Swedish school students travel on language trips, through companies such as EF.

Another reason for Sweden's international success is the advanced standard and high level of uptake of modern technology in the country.

When the internet took off, Sweden was number 2 in the world, after the US. Since the birth of mobile telephony, Sweden has had the second-highest mobile phone density in the world, after Finland. The ability to adapt quickly to new technology has proven vital in the increasingly digital music industry.

All modern recordings are digitalised in some way. Mixing and editing is done using computers. And when it comes to forms of music such as techno, house, hip hop, modern R&B and synth pop, all the music is performed using computers.

There is surprisingly little difference between a modern recording studio and an IT company. The entrepreneurial spirit behind them, the ‘idea factory,’ and the interior design are all similar. Stockholm, which during the IT hysteria at the end of the 1990s was seen as the leading IT city in Europe, also has the highest number of recording studios per capita in the world.

Swedes who want to develop their musical talent can get assistance with renting rehearsal spaces and purchasing instruments. Songwriter and producer Shellback – with eight Billboard No.1 hits – has expressed his thanks to ABF, a union-supported education fund, for the opportunity to pursue his music.

A fourth reason, and possibly the most important, is mentorship. Swedish songwriters and producers work in a non-hierarchical, collaborative way, supporting each other.

Everything started with Denniz PoP (1963-1998). He mentored Max Martin, the most successful songwriter in the world over the past 20 years. Martin in his turn has mentored Shellback.

In recent years, Shellback and Martin have been mentors for the Wolf Cousins, nine young producers behind tracks such as Ellie Goulding’s Love Me Like You Do (theme song for the film Fifty Shades of Grey), Ariana Grande’s Problem and Tove Lo’s Stay High.
8 REASONS WHY SWEDEN ROCKS

Did you know that Sweden is the world’s most successful exporter of chart music, in relation to GDP?* From ABBA to Swedish House Mafia, Robyn, Tove Lo and First Aid Kit, via Roxette and The Cardigans, there always seems to be at least one Swedish act at the top. Here are eight reasons why Sweden, with 10 million inhabitants, rocks the music scene globally.

* According to a paper by American researchers Joel Waldfogel and Fernando Ferreira of the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School, Sweden is the number one exporter of chart music relative to GDP in the world, followed by Canada, Finland, the UK, New Zealand and the US (based on data from 1960 to 2007).

#1 MUNICIPAL MUSIC SCHOOLS

If you’re wondering why Sweden produces such great artists with staying power, it’s worth taking a closer look at how Swedish children are raised especially within the realm of music.

Anders Nunstedt, a music reporter and editor for daily newspaper Expressen, says the most obvious reason is municipal music schools (kommunala musikskolan) that – while not mandatory – were hugely popular in Sweden during the 70s and 80s and still are. ‘During these decades success from artists like ABBA gave young Swedish musicians confidence that, even though Sweden is a small country, we can still make a big impact on the international music scene,’ notes Nunstedt.

Access to instruments and classes are provided through music schools run by various local municipalities so many children try their hands at different types of instruments to finally find which ones they’re naturally good at.

‘I started playing drums at 13 after hearing my all-time favourite drummer Cozy Powell playing a drum solo. I was totally overcome by the sheer power of drums and felt right away that “this was it”,’ says Europe drummer Ian Haugland, who did two years at kommunala musikskolan. ‘Apart from the drums I can also play a little guitar and keyboards, but not enough to scare the rats out of the cellar!’

#2 SINGING IN CHOIRS

For those who can carry a tune, many start out in choirs. According to Sveriges Körförbund (the Swedish choir union), roughly 600,000 Swedes sing in choirs, and the union represents about 500 choirs. While these numbers may not seem staggering at first glance, they actually make Sweden the country with the highest number of choirs per capita in the entire world.

Sweden’s strong choral tradition comes from a deep-seated culture of singing folk songs, especially around Midsummer and major festivities like Christmas.

8 REASONS WHY SWEDEN ROCKS. TEXT BY LOLA AKINMADE ÅKERSTRÖM
#3 THE SWEDISH GOVERNMENT LOVES ROCK MUSIC TOO

Since 1997, the Swedish government has awarded its Music Export Prize in recognition of international musical achievements by Swedes. Past honourees have included Swedish House Mafia, Robyn, members of ABBA, The Hives, The Cardigans, Max Martin, and Roxette.

‘Our well-developed social system makes it possible for people to create music even though they do not have a lot of income’, says Daniel Johansson, music industry researcher at Linnaeus University and founder of music analysis firm TrendMaze. This is often jokingly expressed as ‘socialbidraget som ligger bakom bakom det svenska musiknedret’ (‘the social welfare behind the Swedish music miracle’) which highlights the Swedish government’s support of musicians and artists through the Swedish Arts Council.

The council funds those in the early stages of their careers by allocating roughly SEK 1 billion (US$ 110 million, EUR 102 million) in the form of grants to performing arts every year. Singer Miss Li is just one example of artists who’ve received grants from the Swedish Arts Council. ‘Most of the really successful Swedish songwriters and producers have been able to learn their craft because of support from society’, continues Johansson. ‘If they’d been forced into traditional 9-to-5 desk jobs while trying to develop as artists, they probably wouldn’t have become so successful.’

Another interesting initiative is the Nordic Playlist, an online platform aiming to spread cutting-edge music from the Nordic countries to the rest of the world. The website is produced by the Nordic Music Export Programme.
THE ABBA EFFECT

It’s nearly impossible not to include the influence of ABBA in a list like this one. Chart-topping Swedish musical acts and songwriters keep passing the proverbial hit-making baton to each other as they move through the decades.

“We have a strong tradition of folk music in Sweden but I also think great artists serve as inspiration to other artists to make it’, says Ian Haugland. ‘Let’s say The Spotnicks in the 60s inspired ABBA in the 70s which inspired Roxette in the 80s and so on.’

After ABBA, who ruled the 70s and early 80s to become the second most successful group ever behind the Beatles, came Roxette, Neneh Cherry, and Europe who rocked the 80s and early 90s.

The 90s also brought with it Ace of Base and Neneh’s brother Eagle Eye Cherry alongside bands like The Cardigans who would later pass the baton into the early 2000s on to the likes of indie rockers The Hives, Peter Bjorn & John, and Jens Lekman. Today, artists Robyn, Lykke Li, and Miss Li now dominate pop charts in their respective genres.

Visitors can learn more about ABBA’s impressive career at the new ABBA Museum as well as Sweden’s contribution to global music at the Swedish Music Hall of Fame – both located on the island of Djurgården in Stockholm.