



War baby, parentless pariah, pop superstar, regal countess and reclusive widow... ABBA's **Anni-Frid Lyngstad** has lived many lives. Matthew Myers celebrates some of them on the eve of her 70th birthday.

IF YOU REMEMBER ABBA's 1970s heyday of sequined jumpsuits, disco balls and glam rock, it may surprise you to learn that Frida, the brunette, is about to turn 70 – a milestone already celebrated by some of her rock peers including Deborah Harry, Rod Stewart and band-mate Björn Ulvaeus. But the mini-skirts and poodle perms of her pop past are only part of the story. Beyond her successful career, Frida's life has been marked by tragedy and adversity. In fact, it's a

wonder she even survived her childhood.

Frida Lyngstad's dramatic backstory would be fertile material for a musical, albeit a rather sad one. "Out of all four of us, Frida has had the most dramatic life," says Björn Ulvaeus. "Her life is the classic rags-to-riches story. I can just picture the scenes and the cliffhangers."

Let's start with a drumroll, then, as the winners of the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest are announced. Representing Sweden, ABBA's perky

Waterloo takes the prize and creates one of the biggest moments in Eurovision's history. The seeds of ABBA-mania are sewn.

But Frida's story begins many years earlier in the small Norwegian village of Bjørkåsen, at the tail end of World War II. Anni-Frid Lyngstad was born November 15, 1945 to a Norwegian mother, Synni Lyngstad, and German father Alfred Haase. Alfred was a German soldier, part of the Nazi occupation of Norway. The affair between Frida's parents was consensual and so when the war ended Synni fled to Sweden with her newborn baby to avoid being persecuted as a collaborator. The children born to German soldiers were labelled *tyskerbarnas*, or German children, and both mother and child were considered traitors. Many were sent to children's homes, others were, reportedly, used in experimental drug trials.

Shortly after arriving in Sweden, Synni died of kidney failure. She was just 21, leaving Frida to be raised by her grandmother. It was a lonely early childhood, but when music entered her life everything changed. She had natural talent and began singing publicly at the age of 10. Throughout her teenage years she performed in



ABBA: Frida Lyngstad, Benny Andersson, Agnetha Fältskog and Björn Ulvaeus.

a local dance band before joining a big band led by Bengt Sardlind. Around this time she met fellow musician Ragnar Fredriksson, married him, and together they had two children, Hans and Ann Lise-Lotte.

Frida worked the cabaret circuit with regular radio and television appearances and, in 1967, won a Swedish talent contest. First prize included a recording contract and an appearance on the country's leading TV program. Fatefully, this happened to be the same day that Sweden switched from driving on the left to right side of the road, and most people stayed home to avoid the confusion. To Frida's advantage, this meant her performance was seen by a huge television audience and she became an overnight sensation. The next morning EMI secured her contract and her recording career was set.

Her success took her to Stockholm where she competed in the 1969 Swedish heats of Eurovision, placing fourth. That year she also began working in the studio with musician and songwriter Benny Andersson and their long-term personal and professional relationship followed. Frida and Ragnar divorced in 1970. While producing her first album, Benny brought in his musical partner Björn Ulvaeus and his girlfriend, Agnetha Fältskog. All three provided back-up vocals on Frida's first number one single, *Min Egen Stad (My Own Town)*. This, in effect, was one of the very first ABBA recordings.

What followed is music legend. A 2013 figure suggests ABBA sold over 375 million records, but their success spans multiple territories, including albums performed in Spanish for the Latin American market, making it difficult to reach a definitive figure. Certainly the claim "bigger than the Beatles" is valid.

During the 1970s the group appeared on thousands of magazine covers but it was German magazine *Bravo* where an article about Frida was seen by her half-brother Peter Haase and this led to a reunion with her father. Frida believed he had died at sea at the end of the war, but Alfred Haase was alive and well. Frida's feelings about meeting Alfred were mixed. He was the father she never knew – he may also have been a Nazi. They met, but despite attempting to build a relationship, they never meaningfully connected.

Frida and Benny had been a couple since they met in 1969/70 and finally married in 1978. Sadly, the marriage only lasted three years. Björn and Agnetha also divorced in 1979. The quartet continued to record and tour together and, arguably, some of their best work comes post-divorce, including their disco era hits and the heartbreaking ballad *The Winner Takes It All*, a song about the end of a relationship.

After a career spanning folk, pop, rock and disco, ABBA called it quits in 1982. Frida promptly sold her shares in ABBA the company to avoid a tax lawsuit that plagued the others, and was the first to record a post-ABBA solo project, 1982's album *Something's Going On* produced by Phil Collins. The album did reasonably well and the lead single made the top-ten worldwide. Her follow up album was considerably less popular and in 1982 she left Sweden to set up home in London, then relocated to Switzerland a few years later.

In Switzerland a new phase of her life unfolded. Frida met and married the Count Of Plauen, Prince Heinrich Ruzzo Reuss and set up house in a castle in the Swiss Alps. Her daughter Ann Lise-Lotte had a son, making her a grandmother. Through her marriage, she also gained two princess stepdaughters. Frida took the title of Her Serene Highness, Princess Reuss, Countess Of Plauen and became close friends with Sweden's Queen Silvia. Back in 1976 ABBA had performed *Dancing Queen* in her honour on the eve of her marriage to Prince Carl Gustaf.



Below: The cover of *Bravo* (Germany) that led to the reunion with her father. Bottom: Frida turns 70 on November 15.



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During the 1990s, Frida became passionate about environmental causes and joined groups such as The Natural Step and Artists For The Environment, and released a version of Julian Lennon's *Saltwater* for a charity. But her performances were rare. She sang *Dancing Queen* again, a cappella with The Real Group, at Queen Silvia's 50th birthday celebration and recorded a Swedish language album, *Djupa Andetag (Deep Breaths)* in 1996, which hit number one in Sweden. She has since worked with Roxette's Marie Fredriksson, Deep Purple's Jon Lord, and Blood, Sweat And Tears' guitarist Jojje Wadenius.

Then, in 1998, Ann Lise-Lotte died in a car accident near Rochester, New York. The following year her husband died of lymphoma. Frida withdrew from public life and stated she would never record again.

Many years later, however, she slowly began to re-emerge. She attended the opening of *Mamma Mia!* the musical in London. In the one and only real ABBA reunion, she attended the film premiere of *Mamma Mia!* in Stockholm alongside Benny, Bjorn and Agnetha, and later danced with Meryl Streep.

In the past few years, Frida has also given interviews, including an appearance with Agnetha where they jointly accepted the Rockbjörn Prize For Lifetime Achievement. They put

to rest rumours that they had become enemies and stated that their relationship always was, and still is, harmonious. In 2009 Frida attended ABBA's induction into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame with Benny Andersson, and more recently appeared with Björn at the opening of ABBA: The Museum in Sweden.

British comedian and ABBA fan Chris Green created the radio play *Like An Angel Passing Through My Room* with Frida. The play revolves around the unconditional love of a devoted fan.

These days Frida still lives in Switzerland. She shares a home with new partner, Henry Smith, the fifth Viscount Hambleden. She is a billionaire, has co-produced the Swiss Zermatt Unplugged Festival and can still be seen shopping in her local grocery store. Outside of the music world she has created a clothing line for skiers and is heavily involved in pigeon racing, being named Honorary President of the Hardwick Homing Society in the UK! But the music world still beckons, and last February saw the release of a new recording, *1865*, on which she sang a tribute marking the 150th anniversary of the Matterhorn's first ascent.

In recent interviews she has hinted that an autobiography is in the works and that she is open to the idea of an ABBA reunion, as has Agnetha. She says her motto is "to live in peace and respect all the different religions, sexualities and ethnic origins".

Music is still her doorway to the world and her tastes are eclectic from Crosby, Stills, Nash And Young to Eminem.

At the ABBA museum in Stockholm there's a special direct-link telephone that may ring at any given moment, connecting visitors to one of the Swedish foursome. Who knows... if you're there, you may just get a call from former war baby, Princess Of Pop and Her Serene Highness, Anni-Frid Lyngstad of Norway. ★

MORE: Frida – the DVD was released in 2005. Find it on Amazon.