# Beyond Abba: The globalisation of Swedish Popular Music

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## Introduction

In the minds of most Americans, music from Sweden is synonymous with the 1970s mega band ABBA. Careful observers of popular music know, how-ever, that more recently Swedish artists have achieved both artistic acclaim and commercial success around the world. During the last two decades Sweden has become a force to be reckoned with in pop and rock music. This essay will explore the reasons behind Sweden’s emerging position as a popular music centre. In no small part, geographic factors have played a role in this process. These include themes from cultural and economic geography, including Sweden’s position in the world as a small, outward-oriented country; the spatial arrangement of the music industry, both in Sweden and globally; and the propensity for geographic egalitarianism within Sweden.

To begin, Sweden shares some of the responsibility for the hair-spray-and-spandex heavy metal music that was popular in the 1980s; the band Europe scored a hit with The Final Countdown in 1986. A more sustained effort, nineteen Top-40 hit singles in the UK for example, was accomplished by Roxette from 1988 onward.

The Look, Listen to Your Heart, and It Must Have Been Love are stand-outs in the group’s eminently hummable pop-rock repertoire. More blatantly using associations with ABBA, the two men and two women formula of Ace of Base took The Sign to number one on Billboard in 1994. That same year Rednex capitalized on a concoction of Euro disco and American folk tradition and inﬂicted Cotton Eye Joe on the world.

Moving into 2000, international stars headed to Sweden to take advantage of the prowess of Swedish producers and songwriters. Sweden acquired a reputation as a cutting-edge location where the latest musical trends could be harnessed. Celine Dion, Christina Aguilera, Ricky Martin, N’Sync, Kelly Clarkson, and Bon Jovi are but some of the famous artists who wanted their share of Swedish pixie pop dust.

Especially the producer ⁄ songwriter team of Max Martin and Denniz Pop at Cheiron Studio in Stockholm attracted much international attention (similar to ABBA’s Polar Studio before that). Amongst other artists, the duo launched, the careers of the Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears.

Data from various economic indicators, such as royalties and albums sold, indicate that the Swedish ‘‘music miracle’’ started circa 1990 and continued uninterrupted until 2003.

The Swedish government took notice and outlined the music industry in an ofﬁcial report noting that the music export per capita was higher in Sweden than in Great Britain, Australia, Denmark, or Ireland. Royalty payments from foreign markets were twice the US per capita ﬁgure. The notion of Sweden as the third largest exporter of popular music after the US and the UK became a mantra in the description of the country’s music industry success. Revenue from abroad came primarily from the two top markets, the US and the UK, but Swedish record labels have successfully targeted the signiﬁcant Japanese market. The Japanese responded favourably, as they reportedly love the sim-le melodies, especially in the indie pop genre, from a place they imagine to be clean and populated by nice people. In truth, the music industry probably never accounted for more than 0.5 percent of Sweden’s overall exports in any given year, but Hallencreutz and Lundequist (2001) point out that it nevertheless equals the value of iron ore or Absolut Vodka ﬂowing out of the country.