



**STEPHEN BENNETT offers up a big thank you for the music to Mamma Mia's sound guys, Simon Hayes and Tony Lewis, and finds out how they took the musical script from stage to silver screen.**

It's all Ben Elton's fault. While you could apply this statement to many things in life, the reason I mention the former ranting comedian is because he was the man behind the first London-based show to take the simple idea of marrying a brace of classic well known songs alongside an original plot. The idea is such a simple one and was bound to generate sure fire hits, it makes you wonder why no-one had thought of it before. The runaway success of *We Will Rock You*, featuring the songs of Queen, has been followed by a string of hit shows in a similar vein – the latest of which features the music of, arguably, the world's most famous band, ABBA. *Mamma Mia* has made the transition from stage to silver screen with the help of Production Sound Mixer, Simon Hayes, and Music Editor, Tony Lewis. Directed by Phyllida Lloyd and starring Meryl Streep, Colin Firth, Stellan Skarsgård, and Pierce Brosnan, it's the story of a bride-to-be searching for her real father and features ABBA's memorable songs alongside the more traditional dramatic narrative.

"All of the songs were re-recorded for the movie," says Lewis "and Benny Andersson used pretty much the original ABBA backing band at Monovision Studios in Stockholm". Unusually for this type of project, the album was still being mixed while the the post production team were working on the film. "Benny was getting the stereo and 5:1 mixes sorted, so the first couple of months they got on with creating the soundtrack album and we got on with the film," says Lewis. "Then our two worlds started to combine and we began to conform what they had produced and to lip sync these recordings."

### Post On Location

Another unusual element of the production was that the post production music crew were on set during the shooting of the movie. "My role was looking after lip sync and the associated technicalities involved, and I worked closely with Simon Hayes to obtain exactly what was required from a post production viewpoint," says Lewis. Martin Lowe, the Musical Director of the original West End stage show was the primary contact with the talent, and it was he who coached Streep and the other cast members to refine their performances as they lip synced, or performed live, their particular ABBA track. "I sat with the Director and her crew and was able to comment when I felt the lip sync was questionable and perhaps suggest a retake," says Lewis, "I obviously have more experience of what can and cannot be fixed in post than most of the others working on the set – especially those who don't work in post!" he laughs. Lewis was on site to argue the case when he felt that a particular take didn't look convincing. "You need to bear in mind we had a massive crew and various weather issues out in Greece, so we had to carefully choose our moments when we asked for another take," he says. "We still had a couple of issues back in the studio, but I strongly believe that because we were involved from the outset that we had less problems in post."

Lewis then had to contend with the ongoing saga of getting the actors to look as if they were actually performing the songs live and the not inconsiderable challenge of

cutting these famous songs together alongside the picture. "One of the difficult things we found in post was that we had tunes such as *Dancing Queen* and *Super Trouper*, all of which are strict 4/4 time yet which we had to fit alongside an ever malleable picture. Of course Benny and Björn are very proud of their ABBA heritage and wanted to be involved at every level – so basically we found that if we wanted to do anything we had to call them first!", says Lewis. As he is usually based very much in post production in the studio, being able to persuade the producers to have them on board from the off meant that the task of sitting in a cutting room in front of Pro Tools all day and sorting out problems was greatly simplified. "It was a brilliant opportunity to be involved in the initial creation process so we could attempt to sort out problems before they arose," says Lewis, "Obviously things do happen as people change their creative minds and other problems occur, but it was great to see the fantastic talent of Streep and her supporting cast in action – it was a once in a lifetime opportunity for me."

The film's most famous star turned out to be very adept at facing the challenges of performing in a musical, as Lewis explains. "Streep loves ADR," he laughs. "She is one of those actors who can see exactly what it's for and understands what it can do for her performance – she doesn't make a meal out of it and just gets on with it rather than, as some others do, go on about why the sound person hasn't done their job properly." The film required a lot of vocal re-recording partly to make sure the performance and lip-sync were just right, but also to make sure the movie retained a somewhat live feel. "The Director had a vision that the singing should have an 'essential liveness,'" says Lewis, "If you see the film it's quite raw, but has this amazing life – everyone looks like they are enjoying themselves tremendously." There was a lot of re-recording of both lead and crowd vocals and the film had backing vocals in all the locations of the shoot – again to maintain this live feel.

### Performance Capture

Hayes' task was also complicated by the Director's unusual requirements, "Phyllida explained that she wanted the film to actually appear as if the actors were singing live and asked me if this were achievable – to which I of course replied yes!", he explains. "So if an actor is performing some physical task, we wanted to incorporate this into their performance." The singing was recorded live alongside the backing tracks using Sennheiser and Schoeps boom microphones and, more importantly from Hayes' viewpoint, DPA tie-clip lavaliers. "The ABBA guys had suggested we use DPAs as they found from their experiences with the Swedish stage show, they cut better alongside pre recorded tracks," says Hayes. "Luckily, we were already using DPAs and found them more useful than the boom microphones – which had to often be placed quite far away from the action due to the multi-camera nature of the shoot." Clothes rustle, which can be a major problem in movies with stark backgrounds, wasn't considered too much of a problem in this film, "When you have Meryl Streep climbing up the side of a goat shed and singing, you're bound to

## MAMMA MIA

Director – Phyllida Lloyd

Production Sound Mixer – Simon Hayes

Supervising Music Editor – Tony Lewis

Supervising Sound Editor – Nick Adams

Supervising Foley Editor – Alex Joseph

Supervising ADR & Dialogue Mixer – Tim Hands

Report – Stephen Bennett



▶ have a bit of clothes rustle!", laughs Hayes. The live and/or the pre-recorded tracks were then used wherever they were considered the best choice to achieve the Director's goal of preventing the audience from jolting out of the fantasy world the film attempts to create.

Lewis says that Hayes was essential to them achieving their results in post. "Simon recorded everything," says Lewis. "He had radio mics on each performer and captured practically everything that was done." Having these recordings enabled Lewis to compare the actual performances of the actors to those recorded on the soundtrack so they could get an actor back in to re-record if they felt that the projection was wrong. "Simon was brilliant and his team were such an asset in post," says Lewis. "We sat him down and said 'this is what we want to achieve – so how do we do that?' Simon and his team basically moved heaven and earth to make things possible for us. For example, they organised the shifting of some huge generators by 200 metres, which involved lots of people and a massive crane all working over the bank holiday weekend." To achieve this mammoth task of recording the singers live as much as was possible, Hayes decided not to use a 'thumper track', a low frequency beat to give the performers a cue and which can be EQ'ed out, but rather to equip Pinewood's huge 007 soundstage and location shoots with induction loops. "We went directly to the companies that produce these for theatres and cinemas, and had the performers wear 'earwigs', which are tiny hearing aids for monitoring," he says.

### In The Studio

The final touches of the 5:1 mix were done in Stockholm and a large number of stems were taken to New York for completion. "We had pretty much the multi-tracks running alongside the film – it was essentially musical Foley," says Lewis. The mixes were done at Studio L in New York's Sound 1 alongside Michael Barry and Dominic Tavella. "Benny was still there and still involved, tweaking the mixes into the dub live," says Lewis. "It took us three weeks working with respected Sound Designer Nick Adams, and his team again helped maintain the live feel of the production as they generated a lot of Foley. We wanted to avoid that situation where you come to a song in a musical and all of the sound dies bar the music itself – which usually just gives the impression that the only thing the Sound Designer has done is press 'play'!" The audio team worked extensively



with Digidesign hardware and software – as Lewis explains. "Benny was writing and pre-producing the score on one of those little USB MBOX micros, and we played back on the set using the MBOX 2 and 003 backup rig. We had a pair of HD2s in the cutting room during post each with a with a Control 24, and in New York we had another pair of HD3s, one of which was hooked up to a D Command – so it was pretty much all Digidesign all the way."

Michael Barry used a lot of real time use of ▶



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► plug-ins for the mix, as Lewis explains. "As we were essentially running the stems live we had a lot of plug-ins running live too. We also had some hardware inserts connected up including a Lexicon 480." However, the team encountered a few latency problems with some of the plug-ins – notably with Clemony's Melodyne. "We used it a lot to tune vocals," says Lewis, "but the PDC (Plug-in Delay Compensation) worked beautifully in most cases. It was a very educational experience for me, as I had to throw away some of my preconceptions," he continues. "I was used to having mixes and dubs all pre-rendered and fixed into 5:1 surround – so this was very different! I was faced with 120 to 140 tracks all running live into a dub, all with automation and plug-ins – we had to be completely flexible for Benny and Björn, which is something they quite rightly expected from our team. I think that this was a bigger deal for them than the old *ABBA The Movie*, and they felt that it was only going to really come together at the final dub – and I take my hat off to them for realising that was the case. It was a lot of work, but it paid off in the end." <sup>19</sup>



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