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# IS HOT

**These American superstars work with Scandinavian songwriters and producers on their chart-topping hits. Here's how the Scandipop genre came to be and how it's making its mark on the music industry.**

BY TAYLOR HUGO

**Y**ou no doubt recognize the names Taylor Swift, Britney Spears and Katy Perry, but what about Max Martin, Andre Lindal or Mikkel Eriksen?

Though their names don't carry the same star power as America's biggest pop musicians, their work speaks for itself: They are the people responsible for a large portion of those catchy Top 40 tunes—think: "Blank Space," "Baby One More Time," "Irreplaceable" and "Unfaithful," to name a few. But



besides getting a credit on the albums of the music industry's A-listers, they have another trait in common: They are all Scandinavian.

It's openly acknowledged in the music industry that Scandinavians are the not-so-secret weapon when it comes to producing many of today's irresistible earworms, so this may come as no surprise. Scandinavians have been pop powerhouses for decades—just look back to the 1970s, when a group called ABBA burst their way onto the music scene and changed it forever.

### ON THE POP MUSIC MAP

Originally made up of two couples—Agnetha Fältskog and Björn Ulvaeus, and Benny Andersson and Anni-Frid Lyngstad—ABBA drew its name from the members' first initials. The group began performing together in 1970 as a cabaret act called Festfolket.

Although that initial collaboration was unsuccessful, their 1972 song "People Need Love" garnered some positive attention in Sweden, their home country. That prompted them to enter the 1973 Melodifestivalen, an annual competition that determines the country's representative in the international Eurovision Song Contest. Though ABBA didn't win Melodifestivalen with their song "Ring Ring," it became the biggest hit in Sweden that year, spreading their name and sound to other European countries.

Within a year, everything had changed. In 1974, ABBA entered Melodifestivalen again and won, going on to take part in the Eurovision finals hosted

in Brighton, England. There they took top honors with their song "Waterloo," which soon reached number one on the charts in Europe and the top 10 in the U.S., spawning a series of hits over the next decade including "SOS," "Mamma Mia," "Dancing Queen" and "Fernando."

The group disbanded in 1982, but they left an undeniable legacy. To this day, ABBA remains the most successful Eurovision winner in the contest's 64-year history (the 2020 event takes place May 12–16 in the Netherlands), and

their music lives on thanks to tribute bands like A\*Teens and movies like "Mama Mia!" In 2010, the group was even inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame—but perhaps their most significant achievement was putting Scandinavians on the global pop music map.

"ABBA, of course, ticked off the big boost for Scandinavia when it comes to pop music," says Siw K Sommer Winther, a cultural historian, composer, artist and CEO of Sound of You, a Norwegian audio-branding agency that has worked with artists like Sting, Boy George and Miley Cyrus. "ABBA had a very distinct sound, and it kind of lifted the roof for Scandinavia. They paved the way."

### SCANDIPOP REVOLUTION

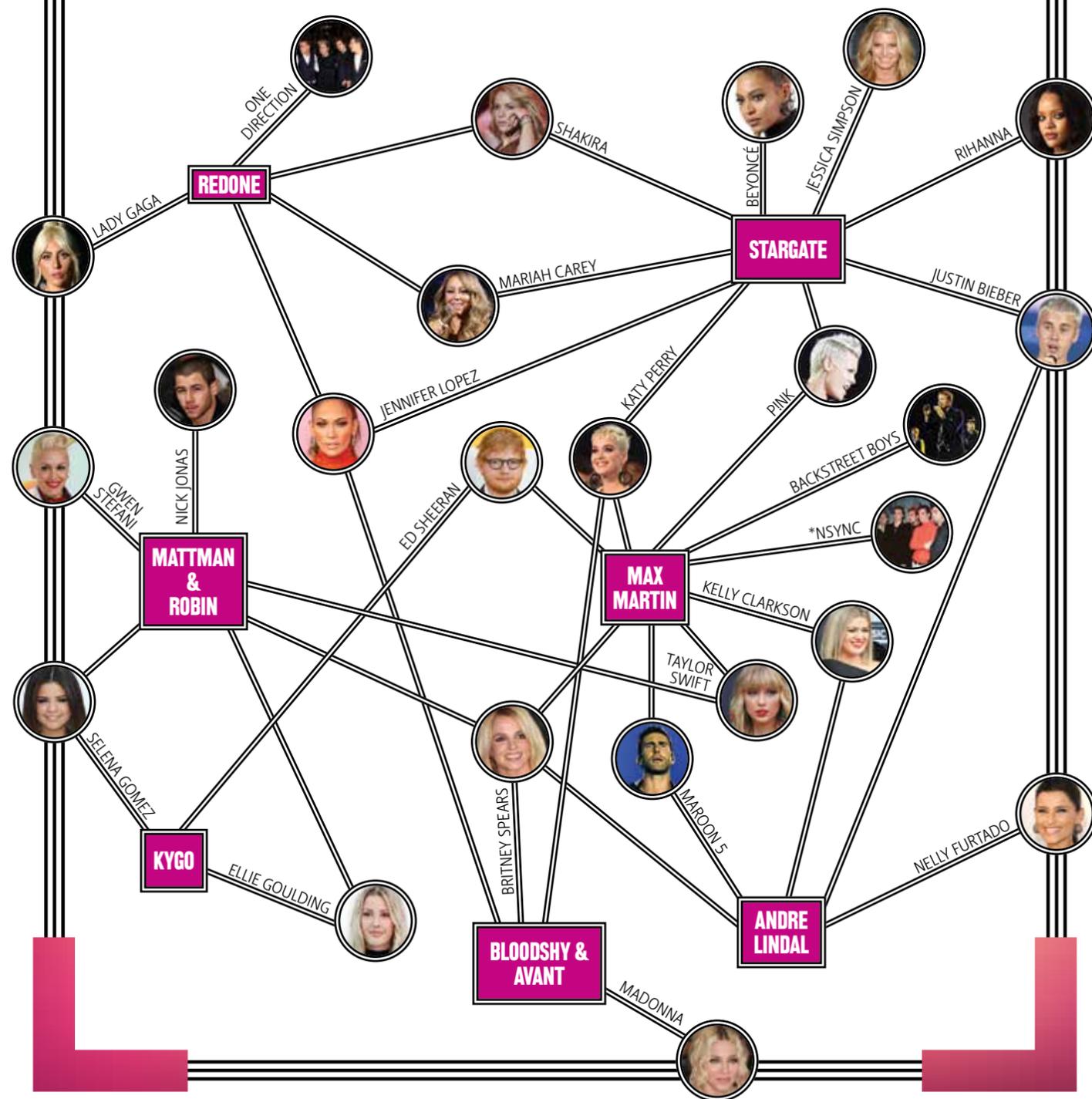
Since ABBA signed off and told their fans "Thank You for the Music," Scandinavian artists have continued to succeed with pop in their home countries and abroad. A-ha, the band from Oslo, was the first Norwegian group to have a number-one hit in the U.S. with their iconic song "Take On Me," while Swedish pop group Ace of Base sold more than 9 million copies of their 1993 album "The Sign." Swedish singer Robyn also had two Billboard Hot 100 singles after dropping her debut album "Robyn Is Here" in 1995.

"I really wish that [modern] Scandinavian pop music would be more influenced by ABBA because their sound is so spectacular," Winther says. "There are very few artists around the world in any genre that really can master making good, happy music, so I would love to hear more of that."

One contemporary artist she thinks has come close is Kygo. Born Kyrre Gørvell-Dahl, the 28-year-old Norwegian DJ exploded in popularity when he released his first original song "Firestone" in 2014, and has since gone on to collaborate with American megastars like Selena Gomez and John Legend. Though Kygo's focus

# POWERHOUSES OF POP

Many of your favorite pop artists can trace their chart-topping songs back to Scandinavian songwriters and producers. Here's a look at some of those connections.



PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MATT WINKELMEYER/IAS8, LARRY BUSACCA/PAW, KHALED DESOUKI

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is electronic dance music, he has been credited with inventing the “tropical house” genre, an EDM-pop hybrid that sounds exactly like its moniker: laid back and beachy. Ellie Goulding’s “First Time” is a good example of this, as is Selena Gomez’s “It Ain’t Me,” both of which feature Kygo as a co-producer.

“Kygo is kind of the only one who has really developed a very distinct sound after ABBA, in my opinion,” Winther says. “He’s been a game-changer.”

Other Scandipop artists currently riding a wave of mainstream success on stage include Ålesund, Norway-born Sigrid, the songstress behind “Don’t Kill My Vibe,” and Stockholm’s Icona Pop, whose “I Love It” collaboration with Charli XCX peaked at number seven on the Billboard Hot 100. Taking a page from the boy bands that came before them, 15-year-old twins Marcus & Martinus play up the heartthrob vibe with teenage love songs in both English and Norwegian, and Aurora, the singer-songwriter from Stavanger, Norway, most recently hit the big screen with her “Into the Unknown” duet with Idina Menzel in “Frozen 2.”

Not all Scandinavian pop musicians enjoy the spotlight, however, and some of the region’s biggest hits come from people who—unlike the megastars who sing their songs—are basically anonymous outside of the music industry. Max Martin and Stargate, the duo made up of Tor Erik Hermansen and Mikkel Eriksen, are perhaps the best examples of this. Although relatively unknown as individuals, they’ve collectively produced songs for a Who’s Who of American pop music, including Beyoncé, Kelly Clarkson, Rihanna, Jennifer Hudson and Backstreet Boys, to name a few (see the infographic on page 25 for more).

### THE “X” FACTOR

This Nordic tune takeover has prompted countless writers and educators to ponder the question: Why are Scandinavians so good at pop music?

“I think that Scandinavians are perhaps more focused on melodies than lyrics,” says Nils-Egil Langeland, the Sound and Music Production program

leader for Noroff School of Technology and Digital Media, explaining what makes Scandipop stand out. “Many producers comment on this focus on melody as a Norwegian or Scandinavian ‘trait’ or ‘sound.’ Perhaps it’s because we grow up liking songs based on melody and not lyrics, because we don’t understand English as a child. I’ve noticed that although my students are good at writing and speaking English, the melody is often a higher priority than the lyrics.”

In The Atlantic article titled “Why Is Sweden So Good at Pop Music?,” Swedish academic Ola Johansson argues that Scandinavians’ penchant for pop comes from factors like their ability to speak English well and keep up with the latest trends, as well as the popularity of MTV when the channel debuted in Sweden in 1987. The Globe and Mail calls Sweden the “Nashville of the Nordics” for being one of the world’s biggest exporters of music relative to the size of its economy, while an Independent article quoting Norwegian singer Dagny explained it

most simply: “Pop is in the water and comes out in great songs.”

The internet has also played a role in the more recent explosion of Scandipop. “Norway, and the Nordics, were early adopters of Spotify [a Swedish company], and when the rest of the world started streaming music, our songs were already there. This created an international attention we have not had before,” says Kathrine Synnes Finnskog, the managing director of Music Norway, an organization whose mission is to “facilitate growth in interest and use of Norwegian music of all genres” through grants, networking opportunities and counseling.

But according to Winther, who is releasing a double album titled “Birds of Paradise” under her artist name Shekinah this year, there is another “X” factor that helps make Scandinavians so successful—and it has nothing to do with the music.

“Scandinavians are so down-to-earth,” says Winther, pointing to a way of living ruled by what’s known as *janteloven*, or The Law of Jante. Put simply, it’s a Nordic code of conduct that encourages people to live free from boastfulness and jealousy. “The few who manage to ignore this are strong personalities, but also very grounded, hardworking and focused.”

While humility is an admirable trait, Winther argues that this can also be a downfall, and she would like to see less emphasis placed on *janteloven*. “I think we need more of that ‘go for it’ enthusiasm. I would love to see schools and parents encouraging new talents and making them believe it’s possible. Nobody in the world is better at that than America,” she says. “I think the younger [Scandinavian] generations have been more influenced by the American way of seeing things. They are bolder because they are more involved with social media. They’re less shy than the previous generations in music.” 🇳🇴



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES; C. FLANIGAN; DAVID M. BENNETT; KEVIN WINTER; FRANK HOENSCH; DAVE J. HOGAN; PICTURE ALLIANCE. ALL PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES.