

ON AND ON AND ON

This is an excerpt from ABBA – The Complete Recording Sessions by Carl Magnus Palm, published 31 March 2017. The excerpt is an example of how a song is typically presented in the book, with one or more entries for the basic recording and likewise for the mixing. The reader is encouraged to have easy access to ABBA's recording of 'On And On And On' when reading, as this will make it easier to follow the recording and mixing process. Enjoy!

12 February

Polar Music Studios. Recording 'Esses vad det svänger när man spelar jazz' (working title of 'Til The Night Is Gone', a working title of 'On And On And On').

Benny Andersson (keyboards), Janne Schaffer (guitar), Rutger Gunnarsson (bass), Ola Brunkert (drums).

'On And On And On' – according to Benny the second of the two songs written in Barbados – was the last of the five backing tracks secured in an extraordinarily productive period. The working title 'Esses vad det svänger när man spelar jazz' ("Gosh How It Swings When You Play Jazz") was probably a Michael Tretow invention, again having no connection to the song at hand. This was a rock number – almost, according to Benny. "'On And On And On' is fairly close to rock'n'roll. But, in retrospect, there's not enough guitar on it. I've heard the version by Mats Ronander [the ABBA tour guitarist, also a recording artist in his own right, covered it on the 1992 album ABBA – The Tribute], where they really treat it as a rock song – then I think it's pretty good, with real guitars. Nothing can replace that, not even the best synthesizer." Electric guitars, along with Benny's rocky piano playing, were indeed more to the fore on the live version recorded for the Dick Cavett Meets ABBA television special (see 28 and 29 April 1981).

From an arrangement point of view 'On And On And On' is also notable for ABBA's Beach Boys influences manifesting themselves concretely, as Benny's falsetto backing vocals were clearly inspired by Beach Boys hits such as 'Heroes And Villains' and, perhaps most specifically, 'Do It Again'. In a strange turn of events, and much to Benny's amusement, Beach Boys lead singer Mike Love, evidently picking up on the homage, recorded his own version of 'On And On And On', included on his 1981 solo album Looking Back With Love.

As for Björn's lyrics, depicting flirtation at a high-society party, the message, such as it is, seems to be that it's impossible to make sense of life on this planet, so one might as well just go with the flow and take every chance to have fun. "The lyrics are pure nonsense; sort of incomprehensible and muddled," says the lyricist. "You're not quite sure what it's all about, and that was deliberate, but I don't recall exactly why – perhaps that kind of lyric was in vogue at the time. It's very impressionistic: quick impressions, and conveying a sense of something rather than being about something." Nevertheless, when queried about the lyrics shortly after the album's release, Björn admitted that the high-society theme had some bearing on how his own life had changed since becoming an international celebrity. "I do write about things I have experienced myself. It's inevitable that we retreat from an 'ordinary' life."

As a matter of curiosity, on 'On And On And On' Polar Music Studio house engineer Lennart Östlund makes his one and only appearance on an ABBA recording, playing the tambourine together with Björn; this was an overdub, however, made at a later date.

23–24 April

Polar Music Studios. Mixing 'Til The Night Is Gone' (working title of 'On And On And On').

The first recording for the upcoming album to be completed and mixed to everybody's satisfaction was 'On And On And On', or 'Til The Night Is Gone' as it was titled at this stage; it would be changed to its

final title closer to the album release later in the year because, as Benny said, they felt it was “simpler and more ‘catchy’”.

The song was mixed on 23 and 24 April, and the early mixes were quite different to the final version, featuring more of the electric guitar that Benny would later feel the song was lacking. All of them also feature a verse that would ultimately be edited out of the song; it appears at 02:57, and is followed by a number of chorus repeats. In terms of melody, this verse consists of the final half of a verse, sung twice. The lyrics are as follows: “Standing up is scary if your think you’re gonna fall / like a Humpty Dumpty, ‘fraid of falling off the wall / I say if you ever wanna know what’s going on / gotta keep on rocking baby ‘til the night is gone”.

The first mix runs to 03:52 and starts later than the familiar version, at the spot corresponding to 00:07 on the album, with the final three of the four tom-tom beats. When the first verse starts, the drums are quite loud and more “thunderous”, and an electric guitar is hammering single notes, playing along with the bass notes more or less; this is not audible in the album mix. Notably, the GX-1 synthesizer that would put such a special mark on the sound of the song – setting the tone even in the intro – is not present here at all, nor is there any high-pitched note in the second verse (“I said who are you to talk about impending doom” etc.). Then, when the first chorus starts, the sound gets drier, with a lot less echo on everything – in the final mix, the verses would be drier and the choruses more “widescreen” – and there are no Beach Boys-style backing vocals. The “aaah” choirs are there, though, but in the second chorus, and for the remainder of the song, there is a lot more echo on them.

Next up are a number of incomplete attempts, one of which lasts only 15 seconds and features an alternate intro. An electric guitar plays the “on and on and on” melody, just those five notes, while a low-pitched GX-1 synthesizer plays glissando chords; on the second “on and on and on” melody line, the guitar and synthesizer are joined by a bass. Then the tom-toms come in and everything sounds more like the familiar version. Evidently, Björn and Benny quickly realised they didn’t like this intro.

After a few interrupted attempts – one featuring the entire band playing from the start, including the hammering guitar – comes the second complete mix, running to 04:16, which finally introduces the GX-1 sounds familiar from the album version. Nevertheless, the electric guitar is still audible in both verses and choruses. In the vocal passages featuring a vocoder – “people care for nothing, no respect for human rights”, etc. – there is what sounds like an extra vocal harmony. Benny’s Beach Boys choirs have also been introduced into the mix.

The third mix, running to 04:11, is what would ultimately be released on the upcoming album, although the “Humpty Dumpty” verse was deleted, making the album version 30 seconds shorter. However, the full-length version would still be made public. Photographer Anders Hanser had documented ABBA’s 1979 tour of North America and Europe, and wanted to put together a slide show of his pictures. He asked Björn and Benny if they had a new song he could use as a soundtrack, and they submitted ‘On And On And On’ to him; at this stage the decision to edit the song hadn’t been made. When ‘On And On And On’ was issued as a single in some countries towards the end of 1980, Polar Music felt that Anders’ slide show could function as the promo clip, and so it was distributed as such. It was made available for purchase in 1981, on the home video compilation ABBA Music Show 2, and in the 21st Century it was released on CD as well; the stereo mix was first issued on Super Trouper Deluxe Edition in 2011.

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