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KAY DICKINSON

A SONG BY ABBA

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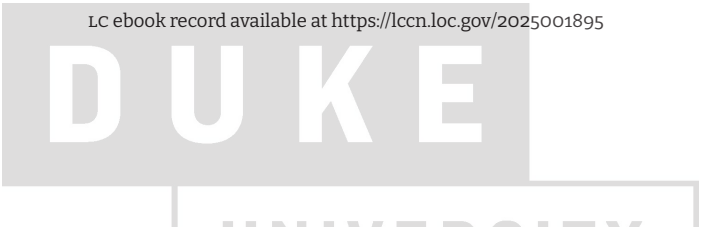

For you and me

For liberty

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Intro

SINCE TAKING ON THIS BOOK PROJECT and inevitably finding myself quizzed about its subject by friends, colleagues, and relatives, not one person, young or old, has confessed ignorance of "Fernando." Most could summon a few lines, particularly from its sing-along chorus, but many soon after disclosed a casual obliviousness to "what it's actually about." The song's lyrics and overall theme have certainly not dodged intense semantic scrutiny, as the coming pages will recount and to which they contribute. I am just as intrigued by how "Fernando" clearly strikes chords through means other than the story it tells in words. For those who hear it that way, a quick plot synopsis (in lieu of a full run of the lyrics, which copyright law prohibits) might be in order. A singer-narrator calls on Fernando to remember a long-gone past when his own nocturnal music-making offset "distant drums" and "bugle calls" (the first verse). The narrator admits how these sounds, now more blatantly those of an approaching enemy army, terrified her (the second verse). The chorus identifies the two characters as active participants in a battle "for liberty." The narrator reaffirms her enduring conviction by avowing, "If I had

to do the same again, I would, my friend, Fernando." The third verse transposes us to a present day when both have advanced in years and laid their weapons to rest. Despite the passage of time, the narrator proclaims, "I can see it in your eyes, how proud you were to fight for freedom in this land." The chorus repeats twice more, with the outro reiterating, for the sixth time, "If I had to do the same again . . ." The specificities of what these actions might have been, and, in fact, where they could have taken place, I shall soon review. But first, this study requires a fuller sense of the song's ubiquity than my opening observations supply.

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People who write about bands, albums, or songs commonly commence with an account of their own first encounter. This examination follows suit, but less so to revel in a personal epiphany that might qualify such a lengthy engrossment as this one. Rather, it stands in unexceptionally for many, many others that attest to the truly global reach of "Fernando." I first heard the track in Egypt via the UK version of ABBA's *Greatest Hits*, which had been released in April 1976. This LP was a gift from a babysitter (like me, also a British expatriate) to cheer me up as I recovered from the mumps. In passing on her own copy, she had probably presumed, as we sometimes do, that she had grown out of ABBA. By 1977, everyone in my international school class was abuzz with ABBA, although the boys would profess to preferring Kiss. The distinct logos of each band were to be found ama-

teurishly hand-scrawled on the notebooks of friends from Iran, what was then Zaire, Bulgaria, Canada, the United States, Spain, and, of course, Egypt. One of the first cassettes I ever bought for myself was ABBA's later *Voulez-Vous* (1979). The location of purchase: a remote *istiraha* (a small stopping-off point with a café) on the desert road between Alexandria and Cairo.

Egypt at that moment was weathering the impact of broader global currents that similarly shaped the genesis of "Fernando" and its journeys around the world. Fernando's Spanish name and the assorted locational cues struck by the song's composition and instrumentation, especially the *quena*-like flute sounds, station its conflict in Latin America. In the sixty-plus years leading up to the inception of "Fernando," the majority of that region's countries—from Mexico to Cuba to Chile—had witnessed at least one popular, leftist uprising against tyranny, inspiring the single's portrait of two such revolutionaries fighting "for freedom in this land."[1] By the time ABBA came to write the track (when the narrator pictures Fernando as "old and gray"), adversaries were gaining the upper hand. Often through brutal, illegitimate, and antidemocratic means, they sought to overturn the equities these movements had achieved in wealth, property, land, and social mobility (often through nationalization) in order to not only reinstate but also advance capitalist hegemony across all possible spectra.

Egypt launched its own socialist revolution—not too dissimilar from the one in which Fernando is embroiled—successfully

and relatively early (1952). The Egyptian revolution's main figurehead, Gamal Abdel Nasser, had enthused popular singers, via the region-traversing power of radio and the partial nationalization of various media industries, into powerfully promoting the cause. By 1974, however, his successor, President Anwar Sadat, was putting in motion a sweeping set of reforms called *infitah*, also known as the Open Door Policy. They aimed to stimulate foreign investment in an augmenting private sector and do away with many previous public provisions. This book will elaborate how these invitations to global capital and reductions of state support—familiar to so many other countries around the planet in the 1970s, not least those in Latin America—helped create the conditions under which a small shop, quite literally in the middle of a desert, might be selling a cassette by a Swedish pop band. The fact that it was clearly a bootleg becomes symptomatic of a swelling informal economy that participants entered to plug gaps in their incomes as the state receded. My family left Egypt to return to the UK shortly before Sadat was assassinated in 1981. The two countries were, and still are, profoundly dissimilar, and relocation to rural England proved a considerable shock to the system. One of the few continuities to smooth the passage was the prominent position ABBA also held in British popular culture at that time.

Let's put that international presence into numbers through some details about what "Fernando" accomplished. As a physical single, it has sold approximately ten million copies worldwide,

topping the charts at the time of its release in New Zealand, the UK, Ireland, West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Portugal, and South Africa. In the mid-1970s, many countries lacked a globally accepted, *Billboard*-endorsed, consistent means of verifying national record sales. Within these less reliable archives of purchasing sit claims of "Fernando" reaching pole position in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, Israel, and the integrated chart of "the West Indies."[2] These logs attest that the song held the number one spot for five weeks in Mexico (Fernando's designated home country; more on that below) as well as fourteen weeks in Australia (and forty total on the charts), a duration unrivaled until Ed Sheeran's "Shape of You" in 2017. "Fernando" became ABBA's first number one in the hard-to-break US charts, albeit its more niche Adult Contemporary category. By some calculations, because it did so well in a broader range of countries, the sales figures for "Fernando" outdo those for "Dancing Queen."[3] But, in the end, such data are difficult to determine without comprehensive accounting measures, statistical recognition of how beloved ABBA were throughout other large swathes of the world (including the Communist Bloc, as chapter 2 will explore), or any handle on the soon-accelerating trade in pirated music alluded to above.

Beyond its success as a single, "Fernando" reached listeners (such as me) through the 1976 reissue of 1975's *Greatest Hits* and then other compilations, most notably 1994's *ABBA Gold*, to date one of the world's best-selling albums. In the 1990s, the inclu-

sion of "Fernando" on *ABBA Gold* would have seemed inevitable; in 1976, its insertion into later UK and North American pressings of the *Greatest Hits* would consolidate the LP's somewhat hubristic title, given that ABBA counted only three chart-topping singles at the time of its initial release. These collections aside, "Fernando" never appeared on any of ABBA's albums proper, making the song something of an archetypal single, standing on its own merits within the format to which this book series is dedicated.

"Fernando" jumps out as a top-selling single in two distinct ways. First, for ABBA, it signaled the band's capacity to prosper with a highly narrative and sensorially descriptive venture that stretched the confines of the typical Global Northern pop tune. Second, precious few songs devoted to this particular theme—Third World struggles for liberation—have climbed such heights of popularity. The bulk of the other tracks joining it on the five-million-plus sales lists dedicate themselves to annual festivals like Christmas, the pleasures of dancing, or more everyday understandings of love and its loss. By contrast, "Fernando" entreats its eponymous hero to recollect a long-ago night around a campfire, rifles to hand, the disconcerting sounds of enemy artillery within earshot; the chorus reaffirms commitment to the cause of territorial emancipation. For certain, similarly themed tracks attract fans far and wide (consider the catalog of Bob Marley), but most of these register more straightforwardly as meaningful and celebrated political interventions. Chapter 1 will concern itself with why ABBA has missed out on approbation of this order.

Like many of ABBA's hits, "Fernando" was written by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus (we will henceforth continue on first-name terms), in a modest retreat on the island of Vigssö, owned by Björn and ABBA vocalist Agnetha Fältskog. The first iteration they penned was destined for fellow ABBA member Anni-Frid (Frida) Lyngstad's solo album *Frida ensam* (Frida alone), which they started recording in July 1975, after returning from a summer tour of Swedish folk parks. This version, with its own more conventional Swedish lyrics, busies itself in cheering up a brokenhearted Fernando. The Latin American ambience persists across the two released renditions, honoring the song's working title of "Tango." Appreciating the song's potential appeal to an audience beyond Sweden, in September of that same year ABBA put together a version in English, one where the geographical hints of the instrumentation were to more squarely meet a new story that it would tell in words.[4] Like many guerrillas, Fernando's exact coordinates have been hard to track, which will be a subject of discussion in chapter 1.

ABBA released this single in most countries in March 1976, but initially remonstrated against its manager Stig "Stikkan" Anderson's proposition that the song should precede "Dancing Queen," which was already in the can (extraordinarily, coming to fruition in the same two-day period as "Fernando"). For ABBA, "Dancing Queen" heralded an exciting new musical direction that "Fernando" did not. With a more solid tread than "Dancing Queen" or its predecessor, "Mamma Mia," although buoyed by equally orna-

mented production and deft vocal delivery, "Fernando" has ever since quelled early presumptions that it would remain something of a "filler" single, put out to buy the band time while it was too busy to write new material.[5]

This study contends that the reach of "Fernando" rests in considerable part on its unique ability to simultaneously educe cross-border sympathies with freedom fighters as it triumphantly traverses those same boundaries as an unapologetic commodity. The book comprises two chapters, which converge on each of these facets by turn. Yet, throughout, I concede to the impossibility of ever truly dissociating them, precisely because the energy generated by their opposition also helps power them both.

Chapter 1 examines the various political insurrections "Fernando" has come to conjure. With militant action so ubiquitous, often so proximate when the track began to chart, what did it mean for a band as middle-of-the-road as ABBA to sing wistfully of armed struggle? Ultimately elusive about the place and type of insurgency it pictures, "Fernando" has come to interconnect a series of dispersed revolutionary struggles, across Latin America and beyond, as well as, in the eyes of certain critics, effectively representing none at all. In the years that followed, this song, from a band personifying straightness (made up of two heterosexual couples) and mainstream approval, has also enduringly spoken to marginalized people—the queer and the misfit—thus finding a place within liberation movements that remain

unmentioned in its lyrics. To date, "Fernando" has reemerged in several films (including the 2018 ABBA jukebox musical *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*) and the virtual concert residency ABBA Voyage (featuring avatars of the band's members) that premiered in London in 2022, each time fostering intergenerational ties, frequently of a matrilineal persuasion. These reappearances demonstrate how struggles for freedom mutate across the decades at the same time as they spawn salable goods that trade on (or in) nostalgia.

Chapter 2 dives deeper into the song's commercial dynamics. To establish its truly worldwide presence, ABBA nimbly surfed new waves in global capitalism. Violently antagonistic to the types of revolution that "Fernando" broaches, free market doctrines in the 1970s prized open and synchronized world markets, with Egypt's *infitah* just one of many such instantiations. From their ever-updating deployment of mass communications (first television, then the motion-captured, virtual "ABBAtars" of ABBA Voyage) to their sensitivity to and exploitation of growing regional markets, including those behind the Iron Curtain, the ABBA team displayed considerable business acumen.

Arriving at and incarnating a moment of change in global economic policy, "Fernando" functions as something of a bridge between the internationalism it thematically expresses and the loosening of borders to transnational commerce from which it profited. Many critics (as the coming chapter plots out) vigorously vilified ABBA for reconciling these declared incompatibil-

ities. For them, ABBA should have taken a countercultural stand rather than a monetary advantage. According to these principles, "Fernando" feels all the more egregious: Revolutionary foot soldiers, no less, are dispatched to amass such spoils. I suspect that these proclivities have deterred all but a few scholarly forays into ABBA territory, despite the magnitude of the band's popularity, now surpassed only by the Beatles and Elvis Presley. There exist four highly notable exceptions to this rule: Philip Tagg, who has dedicated years of analysis to this very song through various iterations of his book *Fernando the Flute*; Carl Magnus Palm, ABBA's rigorous and learned biographer (*Bright Lights Dark Shadows*) and the exhaustive detailer of its studio practices (*ABBA: The Complete Recording Sessions*); Elisabeth Vincentelli, who, among other undertakings in this field, gave us the monograph in the 33⅓ series dedicated to *ABBA Gold*; and Jan Gradvall, the author of the erudite and encouragingly rangy *Book of ABBA: Melancholy Undercover*.

As I settled into the space these researchers freed up to write seriously about ABBA, I constantly mulled over why so few others wish to do so. Probably because songs like "Fernando" do not resolve their politically polarizing differences. In the mid-1970s, these arose from a political and economic tumult (described above as it played out in Egypt) that configures the song's production and dissemination. The enduring and sprawling afterlife of "Fernando" provides little by way of a satisfactory armistice; in fact, it reveals the versatility of popular music in furnishing

fresh, even contradictory, values to unanticipated new communities. In all this, I find "Fernando" increasingly fascinating, precisely because of how it exemplifies the multifarious and sophisticated ways that global popular culture can affiliate (including through animosity) widely experienced tensions. In this, "Fernando" joins many other pop hits that straddle similar divisions between capitalism and its critique (an important subject of inquiry across this Singles book series too). When the spotlight beams in this direction, I shall argue, detractors and fans alike might question the limits of and potential for kinship, for dissent, and for commerce, not to mention the often fraught and unstoppably propagative interaction between them.

NOTES

Intro

1. For a fuller account of these insurrections, see Castro, *Revolution and Revolutionaries*; Gott, *Guerrilla Movements*; Keen, *Latin American Civilization*; Robinson, *Latin America and Global Capitalism*; and Selbin, *Modern Latin American Revolutions*.

2. Snaith, *ABBA: The Music Still Goes On*, 63.

3. Wikipedia, for instance, claims this to be the case, but its citation derives from otherwise unsubstantiated assertions from Philip Tagg's *Fernando the Flute*. See Wikipedia, "List of Best-Selling Singles," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_singles. The point being, really, that precise numbers remain nearly impossible to harvest in relation to global sales during the 1970s.

4. Detailed notes about this session are to be found in Palm, *ABBA: The Complete Recording Sessions*, 53.

5. For a fuller account of these discussions, see Palm, *Bright Lights Dark Shadows*, 272; and Scott, *ABBA: Thank You for the Music*, 91.

Chapter 1. "There Was Something in the Air": The Ambiguous Liberties of "Fernando"

1. Tagg, *Fernando the Flute*, 46.

2. For a fuller argument of how this sensibility builds from European classical music foundations, see Tagg, *Fernando the Flute*, 67.

3. Oldham et al., *ABBA: The Name of the Game*, 118.

4. Tagg, *Fernando the Flute*, 92; Gradvall, *Book of ABBA*, 80–92. See also Broman, "'When All Is Said and Done,'" 47–48.

5. Vincentelli, *ABBA Gold*, 52; Palm, *Bright Lights Dark Shadows*, 416.

6. Palm, *Bright Lights Dark Shadows*, 201.

7. Tagg, *Fernando the Flute*, 5.

8. See Bennett, "Cheesy Listening," 204–5.