

An A to Z of Hit Artists

Talking About
Pop Music:
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By James Iles

Talking About Pop Music

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Preface

When the coronavirus pandemic locked down most of the world in March 2020, my way of working, like everybody's, suddenly changed forever.

I'm the chief sub-editor of a newspaper group where half the staff got furloughed, and one of the first cuts from the company budget was our subscription to the features wire.

Thinking about how to plug the gaps in our content, I felt, with the pause button firmly pressed on gigs and festivals, readers would still need their musical fix.

It's a topic I feel passionately about and, as I will explain in the introduction, pop music has always been a key part of my life.

Brainstorming, I came up with an "A to Z" of my favourite hit artists or possibly a theme based on each letter of the alphabet gave it an immediate structure plus the possibility of up to 26 week's worth of features.

Next I wanted a catchy title that "does what it says on the tin".

"Talking About Pop Music" was an immediate thought. Yes, it's a reference to the one-hit wonder "Pop Muzik" by M, and a very literal reference to what I'd be doing. So, I went with that, supported by a sub-heading of "An A to Z of Hit Artists".

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The “hit artists” reference bound me to writing about groups and solo stars of considerable note, not just any artist or album that fitted the letter.

And though I never set a pre-requisite record sales threshold, it certainly figured when making final choices.

I don’t believe I was too partisan either. Obviously I have gone with many of my personal favourite bands and solo artists as all choices are subjective, but some weeks there were several options which posed a tough choice for me.

On other occasions I deliberately opted for a group or someone who would stretch my knowledge and I found that to be equally as enjoyable and challenging.

For example, ‘D’ offered up both of Depeche Mode and Duran Duran – two groups I am passionate about and have seen live many times and, while I went with the latter, the former got their own chapter later on, under ‘V’ for ‘Violator’.

‘F’ for Fleetwood Mac, on the other hand, was one that taught me so much about a great band with a turbulent history who I’d always admired from afar but had always yearned to know more about.

So, that learning curve was just as rewarding as, say, pouring out all I already knew (and having to severely edit down!) about someone like ‘P’ for Pet Shop Boys, who would definitely be my chosen subject on *Mastermind*.

Writing the features in my own time, it soon became obvious I had so much I wanted to share about the subject of pop music than what

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was edited down for the papers and websites, so this book has been the perfect platform for them.

I have given some of them a “Top three” of songs (unless it is a feature that specifically looks at a set of tracks like ‘N’ for New Order), as well as an underrated track I wanted more people to know about, and I have kept those here where applicable to show my preferences of tracks from the artist or album.

I’ve also kept the online playlists I lovingly compiled on Spotify and Amazon Music here too.

I used both platforms for the compilations as some weeks I found one to be more comprehensive than the other in its coverage of an artist or album.

Those links are written with shortened urls for ease of typing into your smartphone or computer, and the playlists themselves are designed to further augment understanding of the topics.

It goes without saying that I hope readers will become listeners too, and pop on the playlists while reading the book.

I shared many of them on social media so, what started out as an idea to provide interesting content, truly did get tens of thousands of people “Talking About Pop Music” at a time when artists and fans were missing that live connection and new releases have been limited by the pandemic.

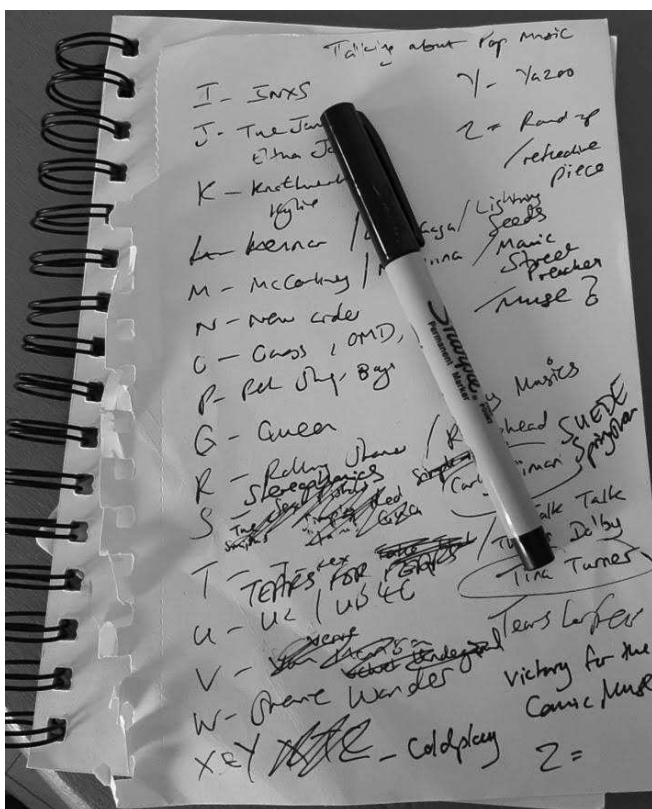
Finally, writing this book has kept me sane during lockdown. Some people went fitness crazy, read books or took up a new hobby. I wrote this book. I hope you enjoy it too!

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*“The year 3,000 may still come to pass,
But the music shall last,
I can hear it on a timeless wavelength,
Never dissipating but giving us strength”*

Pet Shop Boys ‘It’s Alright’

(Tennant/Lowe)



My notepad ‘masterplan’ for this series of features, which changed many times.

Musical Memories

FOR AS long as I can remember - probably aged around four or five - pop music has been one of my biggest passions.

Looking back, it stems, in part, from listening to the likes of The Beatles, the Everly Brothers, Buddy Holly, Abba and even those chart compilation tapes (you know, the ones earned through petrol station tokens in the 1980s) in the backseat of my parents' car.

There were more car journeys back then – setting off from our family home in Hollywood, Birmingham - in the days before people flew everywhere, or could order their shopping online and have it delivered to their door.

I count myself lucky, then, that in turn meant I was exposed to the great songs and beautiful melodies of pop and rock royalty while en route to the supermarket, visiting my grandparents or getting a few albums' worth in on the way to a seaside holiday.

Later, in my teenage years, my own tastes and those of my two brothers developed and expanded, so on went our respective headphones in what became our own private listening booths on those very same car journeys.

For me, it meant listening to those early Pet Shop Boys' albums 'Please' and 'Actually', compilations of 1980s Sunday night Top 40 chart countdowns and everything else from New Order and Prince through to Depeche Mode and The Smiths, more often than not they were taped off an original vinyl copy.

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Later on, as a student in the 1990s, long train journeys to and from university were permeated with whole albums such as Blur's 'Great Escape', Oasis' 'What's The Story (Morning Glory)', 'Coming Up' by Suede and Radiohead's 'OK Computer'.

But listening had never been enough. Since I was about nine or ten, I'd wanted to understand the music I was listening to, specifically the synthesizers bands used on songs like 'Rio', 'Always on My Mind' and 'Enjoy The Silence', and I was saving up pocket money and working part-time jobs to buy all the music gear I could afford.

My parents, to my eternal gratitude, took note of this "hobby", and my devotion to it, and agreed to let me attend the Yamaha Music School in nearby Redditch in Worcestershire, UK.

Toys were swapped for sheet music on my Christmas list and my apparent "ear for music" was refined with the help of this newly-acquired theoretical musical knowledge.

I had become completely immersed in analysing not just the art of songwriting, but also the production behind my favourite pop tunes, studiously poring over the credit notes on album sleeves to learn just who it was that was behind these amazing feats of aural pleasure.

Next I set about creating my own music. This was chiefly made possible by investing all of my building society savings in a Yamaha QY-10 sequencer which I had linked up to a modest but practical full-size key Casio home keyboard using MIDI. I later also bought a QY-70, its much-improved and more expensive sibling!

I would tape my demos on to a then state-of-the-art chrome tape cassette. Years later, I was able to record in even higher quality on a

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mini disc recorder – a much underrated piece of kit that should have caught on better than it did.

I hesitate to admit that some of these instrumental “Jammassound” tracks still exist on Soundcloud.

There, you’ll also find some demos from the university band I played organs for - “Go Bossa”. And great tunes they are too, in my humble opinion!

So here is my confession – I’m a frustrated pop musician too, like millions of others.

But through this book I’ve got to write about it all instead, and it’s been a thoroughly enjoyable process.

Nowadays, my own children are discovering their favourite artists on streaming services and social media.

But while they can make their own short music videos on apps, nothing beats the joy of cranking up your *Walkman*, or recording your own music on to an actual demo tape does it?

Talking of social media, my passion for Pet Shop Boys’ music led me to set up a Facebook campaign to help them score a festive No.1 in 2009 with their ‘Christmas’ EP.

Alas, they did not top the pop parade (the EP format actually made it ineligible for the singles charts) however that group then morphed into something bigger – a fan-based community that now has some 6,000 members globally.

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It's a hive of shared love for my favourite pop group, with all the latest news and gossip shared by Facebook users from the UK to the USA and from Holland to Hong Kong.

Never meet your heroes is the old cliché, but I disagree as I am really lucky to have met Pet Shop Boys - a couple of times - after patiently waiting by the stage door with scores of fellow Petheads.

The first time was in 2002 on their 'Release' tour when both Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe signed a postcard for me which was amazing, even though, sadly, this was before smartphones so, alas, no pictures exist of the meeting.

The second time was in 2007 on the 'Fundamental' tour though, strictly speaking, it was just Neil as the famously shy Chris had already swerved the fans to get straight on the tour bus!

Neil very kindly signed a rare copy of their much sought-after 1989 official annual "Pet Shop Boys, annually", remarking he didn't even have a copy himself. (A moral dilemma for me - should I have given him my copy? Apparently he does have one now!)

I'm also very lucky to have met Depeche Mode (who are very narrowly my second favourite group). This was during a recording for CD:UK which I won tickets to in 2001.

Depeche were back on the Saturday morning shows plugging 'Dream On' and 'I Feel Loved' from their 'Exciter' album and I was able to shake hands with Martin Gore, Andy Fletcher and Dave Gahan in and around the filming.

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No phones or cameras were permitted though. So, again, sadly, I only have the memories. They are ones I will treasure though and I feel extremely fortunate to have met some of my musical heroes.

Last Christmas, I was fortunate to meet John Taylor and Roger Taylor from Duran Duran at a charity fund-raising ball and photographic evidence does exist - see “D is for Duran Duran”.

Incidentally, I competed against the Duran duo and scores of others that night in a pop quiz, and won!

One final thought before we get on with the A to Z and “let the music play”.

It’s my personal musical memories that have steered the content in this book so, before you read my choices, please remember my views, like all musical choices and opinions, are entirely subjective.

I hope you enjoy the results, and if so, why not join in the discussion with me on Twitter?

My handle is *@jammasound* and the hashtag is *#TalkingAboutPopMusic*

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**Join me online “Talking About Pop Music”
on Twitter by following @jammassound**

**“Thank you for the music, the
songs we’re still singing”**

‘A’ is for ABBA

One of my favourite childhood Christmas memories was unwrapping a copy of ‘Super Trouper’ by ABBA.

I can remember this moment like it was yesterday, even some 40 years later.

We already had a copy of the 1976 collection ‘Abba: Greatest Hits’ which had been taped for the car and was by now in a well-worn album sleeve with some songs skipping (admittedly probably because of smaller hands keenly putting the needle on the record!)

So ‘Super Trouper’ was something brand new to us and more songs from ABBA were very welcome.

I still love every track on this LP which captures Benny Anderson, Bjorn Ulvaeus, Agnetha Falkstog and Anni-Frid Lyngstad at the height of their pop mastery.

Revisiting it for this book, I can confirm it has all the calibre of a hits collection, even though it was actually the seventh of ABBA’s eight studio albums.

Referring of course to a type of stage spotlight, the title track is a glorious slice of Europop that tells a story of the band on tour, featuring all the best hallmarks of ABBA - Benny’s majestic piano,

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Bjorn's thoughtful lyrics and the glorious vocals of Agnetha and Anni-Frid. Not many global hits reference Glasgow either.

Songs like the timeless and beautiful 'The Winner Takes It All' are still a go-to track for those suffering the pain of divorce as is 'Our Last Summer' while musically 'The Piper' is as hypnotically catchy as the subject matter.

'Me and I' sees a welcome embrace of synthesizers which were to be such a huge influence in the coming years.

Then there's the hit 'Lay All Your Love on Me' which later helped Erasure to number 1 in 1992 and the brilliant 'Happy New Year', a song of hope at the start of a new decade which I still listen to every New Year's Eve.

ABBA was forged in folk music roots and famously consisted of two couples (Benny and Anni-Frid / Bjorn and Agnetha).

The Swedish quartet became one of Scandinavia's biggest exports since Volvo after bursting on to the scene with a glam-rock look on their 1974 Eurovision winner 'Waterloo'.

From 1976 to 1982 they dominated the charts, particularly in Australia, the UK and USA.

The camp fun, romance and joy of their earlier hits like 'Dancing Queen', 'Ring Ring', 'Money, Money, Money', 'Mamma Mia!' and 'Fernando' gave way to more mature and considered songs later in their career.



Knowing me, knowing you - Scandinavian superstars ABBA.

No more carefree laughter

“Breaking up is never easy”, but ironically for ABBA it inspired a particularly creative period of reflective and poignant songs, starting with ‘Knowing Me, Knowing You’, around the time Bjorn and Agnetha started to have doubts about their marriage.

“In these old familiar rooms, children will play, now there's only emptiness, nothing to say,” penned Ulvaeus with a real sense of heartbreak in the 1977 hit.

Similar true-to-life songs follow, but to their credit ABBA continued to record and perform together despite marital issues.

The sweeping symphonic electronic sounds of pop novella ‘The Day Before You Came’, not even a top 20 hit in the UK, and synth-drenched ‘Under Attack’ and ‘When All Is Said And Done’ marked

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a departure from the disco and glam-rock of their 1970s heyday and a sign of the new direction Benny and Bjorn were heading with their songwriting that would also see them partner Tim Rice to create the musical 'Chess' in 1983.

ABBA are arguably valued more in hindsight - just consider the amount of greatest hits compilations, musicals, films, tribute acts and TV specials that still pervade our lives today - some 38 years since they ceased recording - having wrongly been seen as a bit unfashionable at the time. Well, the outfits didn't help.

Reunited in 2016, new music – at least five tracks, but hopefully a whole album - and a “virtual” tour have been promised soon. Fingers and bell bottoms crossed.

My top three Abba tracks

1. The Winner Takes It All

2. Waterloo

3. Voulez Vous

Underrated track = The Day Before You Came

• Check out my 'A is for ABBA' playlist on Spotify at <https://spoti.fi/2RKcyNu>

Author's notes: *“ABBA were the obvious choice for 'A', though ABC and A-ha were definitely strong contenders, and I really love A-ha!*

“However, ABBA's success and legacy speak for themselves and place them in a league of their own, making them the worthy choice for my first feature in the series.”

**“The stars look very different today,
without Bowie”**

‘B’ is for Bowie

“IF YOU’RE sad today, just remember the earth is over 4billion years old and yet you somehow managed to be alive at the same time as David Bowie.”

This quote, rightly or wrongly attributed at the time to the comedy actor Simon Pegg, felt so perfect for how the world was feeling after Bowie’s untimely death in January 2016.

The enigmatic genius’ final album ‘Blackstar’ had been released just two days earlier and while its content (including the titular song and tracks like ‘Lazarus’) gave a sense of foreboding that Bowie may not have long left on this planet, it did nothing to ease the shock and pain of his passing.

David Bowie influenced so many hit artists across five decades of recording music and was so often at the forefront of fashion it is hard to think of many who could say they hadn’t been inspired, even indirectly, by his broad spectrum of work.

He was the master of reinvention, the chameleon of pop, and such was his timespan that it’s likely a different Bowie era rings true for each of us. For me it was the 1980s that first piqued my interest in the ‘Starman’.

*

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I first recall David Bowie as a Pierrot-esque clown figure in a court procession of New Romantics parading up a beach for the video of 1980 smash hit ‘Ashes to Ashes’.

Here, Bowie “remembers the guy that’s been in such an early song” when he revisits the character of Major Tom from his first chart hit ‘Space Oddity’ (1969), which later went to number one as a re-release in 1975.

The video was the most expensive ever made at the time and perfectly encapsulated the arts and music scene of the period, featuring club scene characters like Steve Strange who were key to the burgeoning New Romantics move that was erupting.

Bowie was the hero of this pop culture movement – 80s stars Duran, Duran, Spandau Ballet, Depeche Mode, and so many others would all cite him as their big influence - yet, in one hit song and video, he both endorsed and reaffirmed their fashion and style as the current coolest thing on the planet.

He was a leader and a follower of cutting edge trends.

‘Ashes to Ashes’ was (only) his second UK No.1, and though he is known for his 1970s ‘Golden Years’ with hits like ‘Starman’, ‘Life on Mars’, ‘Rebel Rebel’, ‘The Jean Genie’ and ‘Heroes’, it’s worth remembering Bowie scored three more of his five UK No.1s in the 1980s.

Chart-toppers ‘Let’s Dance’ (1983) – brilliantly produced by Nile Rodgers – and duets with Queen on ‘Under Pressure’ (1981) and Mick Jagger on ‘Dancin’ in the Streets’ (1985) were to follow. Does commercial success eclipse credibility though? You decide.

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It wasn't just the number ones that defined the 80s for Bowie, he was one of the star turns at Live Aid in 1985, and his prolific career saw him release (often underrated) songs for movies like 'Cat People (Putting Out The Fire)', 'Absolute Beginners' and 'When The Wind Blows' (remember Raymond Briggs' post-apocalyptic cartoon film?). 'China Girl', 'Fame' (with John Lennon) and 'Fashion' are firm favourites from this decade too.



Ssshhh! Kirk Whitehouse recreates a famous image of David Bowie for his Smashed Hits / Broken Vinyl art collection.