

Nordic Avantgarde History Anthology, Volume 3 (1950-1975)

Chapter 7: Avant-Garde between Market and Counter Culture

The Alternative Eurovision Song Contest in Sweden 1975

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On April 6th 1974, Blue Swede's cover version of "Hooked on a Feeling" occupied the number one spot on the Billboard chart.¹ This was an extraordinary achievement, especially considering it was the first time a Swedish rock act topped this American list. On the very same day ABBA won the Eurovision Song Contest at the Dome in Brighton, England. After that, Swedish popular music would never be quite the same. Blue Swede didn't manage to sustain their international success, but ABBA, of course, went on to become the perhaps most prosperous band of the 70s. Needless to say, those crucial events had profound consequences for the Swedish music scene. One was that Sweden as the winning nation was expected to host the next Eurovision Song Contest, which took place at the Älvsjö Fair in Stockholm in 1975.

Now, it was not trivial for relatively small countries such as Sweden to host such a grand event. In fact, in 1974 the British BBC only agreed to host the Eurovision Song Contest after the declination of the previous year's winner, Luxemburg, *and* the second best nation, Spain. (Great Britain came third in the 1973 competition). Wallis and Malm put it this way.

Playing host to Eurovision Song Contests is something any small nation in Europe dreads. It digs such a deep hole in the budget that some countries decline, even after a win and despite any advantages for the tourist industry.²

The Swedish Broadcasting Corporation did actually have some financial difficulties at the time, and therefore cut the corners on free-lancers and the coverage of local music making. All the same, the management at the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation decided to honour its obligations towards its European partners, and went along with the event. This resulted in sharp reactions and fierce protests domestically.

The arrangement of the 1975 Eurovision Song Contest clashed with a new cultural policy that the Swedish government had set afloat in 1974. The basic idea was that the government should provide funding for non-commercial art forms. This cultural policy stated that decentralization was a primary goal, as was the need to provide means for neglected people, guarantee historical culture, and to neutralize the "negative impact" of commercialism. A governmental institution, *Statens Kulturråd* [The National Council for Cultural Affairs], was founded to achieve these goals.³ The "do-it-yourself" ethics of the new cultural policy was heavily influenced by a context primarily established by the avant-garde.

In Sweden, the progressive music movement was very influential at the time. It was a social

¹ Blue Swede was fronted by the Swedish top singer Björn Skifs. Another prominent member was Anders Berglund.

² Wallis & Malm (1984: 125f).

³ Broman (2005: 47); Frenander (2001).

movement with amateurs and some professional musicians, intellectuals and political activists with left-wing tendencies that had roots in the avant-garde. It created a kind of subaltern counter-public sphere somewhere in between the market and the state and municipal authorities.⁴ Regarding the Eurovision Song Contest, the music movement was at the forefront of the protesters, and decided to set up a grand scale manifestation, famously known as the Alternative Festival. This was not an entirely new idea, but echoed the demonstration “Stoppa mässan” [Stop the Fair] used at an earlier event. In 1968, a commercial Teenage Fair was held at the Älvsjö Fair in Stockholm. Young musicians and activists protested outside the gates and arranged for busses to transport the public to an alternative event with live rock music at Stockholms Terrasen in the centre of Stockholm.⁵ In 1975, however, the Alternative Festival manifestation had a much larger impact.

The music movement felt that the policy of the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation was not in tune with the new cultural policy that the government recently had issued. The Eurovision Song Contest was considered a commercial event, held primarily for the benefit of the international record industry, rather than being a forum for genuine intercultural exchange. The event was financed by licence fees, and the profits were mostly obtained by the international record companies, who of course took the opportunity to sell the hits on records afterwards. The music movement demanded that the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation changed their policy in order to support local and domestic cultural and musical activities, rather than spending a lion's share of the budget on promoting the international and commercial record industry.⁶

To gain maximum impact, the music movement decided to cooperate with an impressively large number (about 30) of publicly funded institutions and organisations, notably *Rikskonsert* [The National Institute for Concerts], that supported the Alternative Festival. The aim was to show off that there was a vibrant and rich cultural life, dwelling outside commercial charts and competitions. The Alternative Festival was a huge manifestation that went on for a week in Stockholm, with about 850 musicians from ca. twenty different countries, playing and singing in various styles and genres (e.g. classical, jazz, rock, and folk music), and an audience of approximately 12000 people. All of this was carefully planned to coincide with the Eurovision Song Contest. The campaign was a tremendous success that actually managed to influence the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation to withdraw from participating in the Eurovision Song Contest during the year after, although in 1977, Sweden rejoined the competition again.⁷

The Alternative Festival that took place in Stockholm is well documented. Music from the event was recorded and released on a double-LP (MNW 58-59P, 1976). Participants from the avant-garde, such as Leif Nylén and Tore Berger, were pivotal in exposing the festival. Berger even funded and produced an independent feature film (*We have our own song*) that was shown on cinemas all over the country. There were also a number of radio and television programmes that covered the event.⁸

⁴ Cf. Fraser (1992 and 1995); Negt & Kluge (1972/1974).

⁵ Lønstrup & Nilsson (1980: 27); Thyrén (2009: 58-59).

⁶ Uppsalakommittén för en alternativ festival (1975a); Wallis & Malm (1984: 126).

⁷ Lilliestam (1998: 108); Nylén (1976); Wallis & Malm (1984: 126).

⁸ The film *Vi har vår egen sång* [We have our own song] (1975) is produced by Tore Berger and Jan Lindkvist. The project was financed by Tore Berger with private funds. Swedish Television's Channel 2 was not actively involved in the Eurovision Song Contest at the time and therefore allowed some coverage. Berger (2003): interview 2003-03-03; Wallis & Malm (1984: 126).

However, the Swedish music movement was complex, heterogeneous and divergent. In fact, it has been interpreted as consisting of several subcultures and local communities, loosely linked together by a few comprehensive symbols and common goals.⁹ I will here give examples of two local practices within the music movement, one in Gothenburg, and one in Uppsala. Each local practice included participants, both musicians and activists, who were part of various subcultures, differing in both musical taste and politics.

In Gothenburg, local musicians and activists gathered around the music house Sprängkullen. It was located in the rough and proletarian neighbourhood of Haga. Sprängkullen was an extremely important part of the local scene and provided an arena for live concerts and theatrical performances, as well as a café and a bookstore. Several local rock bands, including professionals such as Nynningen, also used the facilities to rehearse. Sprängkullen hosted the editorial staff of the music movement's monthly magazine, *Musikens Makt* [the Power of Music], as well as the office of the nationwide music organisation *Kontakt nätet* [The Contact Network]. At the time, Sprängkullen also hosted the local, non-commercial record company *Nacksving* [Headlock] and its record distributor *Plattlangarna* [The Record Pushers]. Sprängkullen had approximately 6700 members, and was the largest cultural organisation in Gothenburg during the latter part of the 1970s.

During the initial planning of the Alternative Festival, Sprängkullen took active part in the festival committee and worked officially as a co-arranger. In fact, Sprängkullen was one of the organisations that eagerly supported the idea at an early stage. However, when it was decided to concentrate the Alternative Festival to the Stockholm area, Sprängkullen protested wildly and argued for decentralization, in accordance with the guidelines of the new cultural policy. The reasons for situating the event in Stockholm were primarily to gain maximum exposure and increase the chances for monetary support. It was also decided that the music movement should invite various partners. Most of them were publicly funded institutions and organisations. This would increase the exposure in the media and also guarantee much needed financial contributions. The Alternative Festival committee did receive 120.000 Swedish crowns from the National Institute for Concerts, a very generous sum at the time.

Now, the activists from Sprängkullen were deeply suspicious and critical of financial support from any authority, both state and municipal. They felt that such benefits would risk to jeopardize their independence and make them look weak, soft and maybe even "feminine". As a consequence, it might be easier for the authorities to attack and bring them down at a later stage. Instead they wanted to build up their own counter-public sphere outside both the state and the market. In this particular case, they agreed to receive the contribution from the National Institute for Concerts, on the condition that the monies would be divided and that half the sum should be used for a decentralization of the arrangement, preferably to Gothenburg. When the arguments did not meet with a favourable response, and no compromise could be reached, Sprängkullen decided to jump ship and left the organisation of Alternative Festival, just one month before the event were to take place. The defection was kept secret within the Alternative Festival committee for as long as possible. Sprängkullen was a very important part of the music movement, and the festival arrangers did not want to give an impression of interior antagonism. Nevertheless, the incident soon leaked out to the media that did not take long to make the most of it.¹⁰

⁹ Cf. Thyren (2009).

¹⁰ Andersson (1975); [Anonymous contributor] "På Sprängkullen" (1975): *G-P* 1975-03-20 (press item); Bergman (1975); Nylén (1976).

The motive behind Sprängkullen's defection was not just economical, but also political and ideological. Politically and ideologically, Sprängkullen felt that the Alternative Festival was too mainstream, and that the socialistic arguments and critique towards the Eurovision Song Contest therefore got lost. In addition, Sprängkullen wanted to display Liberation Organisations from the Third World. That included the Vietnamese FNL, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge, and Chilean socialists in exile.¹¹

So, Sprängkullen boycotted the Alternative Festival and stated that it would continue as usual with the regular activities. But that was not entirely true. The activists from Gothenburg soon worked out a slogan, stating that "Sprängkullen does not arrange no alternative festival – instead it offers alternative entertainment during the whole year". Under this banner, a local programme was set up during the exact same week as the Alternative Festival was carried out in Stockholm. The events at Sprängkullen started on Thursday the 20th of Mars with a screening of the movie *Ole dole doff* (1968), by Swedish filmmaker Jan Troell. On Friday and Saturday folk and 'World Music' acts Vargavinter and Iskra played. Both groups came from Stockholm. Sprängkullen also invited a dance theatre group from Stockholm. On Sunday the 23rd of Mars, the Chilean group Karaxú (led by the famous artist and composer Patricio Manns) performed. It was the first time Karaxú played in Gothenburg. The performance was complemented by a discussion on the fight for freedom in Chile.¹²

It is very interesting to note that two of the most prominent groups from Gothenburg – Nationalteatern (music theatre act) and Nynningen (rock band) – opted to travel to Stockholm and participate in the Alternative Festival, despite Sprängkullen's official boycott of that event. Both had very strong ties to Sprängkullen and the local scene. But Nationalteatern was a constellation with somewhat mixed political and ideological views. Artist and composer Ulf Dageby in particular is a headstrong character that does not like dogmatism on any level. Dageby, accompanied by musicians from Nynningen, did a tremendous success at the Alternative Festival, performing as his alter ego *Sillstryparn* [The Herring Strangler], singing "Doin' the omoralisk schlagerfestival" [Doin' the Immoral Schlager Festival], with a heavy Gothenburg accent. This is a song of great irony that included direct attacks on fascist Spain, the Eurovision Song Contest, and ABBA as well as on their manager Stig "Stikkan" Anderson. The song's title and chorus "Doin' the Immoral Schlager Festival" could of course be interpreted as a critical analysis of the Eurovision Song Contest as a phenomena. The song became something of an anthem for the Alternative Festival. It was included on the double-LP from the festival and was also released as a single. Before long, it became a nationwide hit. Nowadays, it is more often than not included on compilation albums of the era.¹³

It should also be stressed that the Alternative Festival in Stockholm did include elements of an international character, despite Sprängkullen's objections. For example, the Chilean folk duo Amerindios played, and there was also a Chilean evening being organised during the festival (at the München Brewery in central Stockholm). Other international artists included Balkan, and Silvervagnen (Denmark), Amtmandens Døtre (Norway), Pokkabet, Gunnar Thordasson, and 3 På En Pall (Iceland), Fungus (Holland), and Peggy Seeger & Ewan MacColl (US & UK).

¹¹ Please note that this was at a time when the Vietnam War was at its final stage and the Khmer Rouge was just about to take the power in Cambodia.

¹² Andersson (1975); [Anonymous contributor] "På Sprängkullen" (1975): *G-P* 1975-03-20 (press item); Bergman (1975); Nylén (1976).

¹³ Broman (2005: 49 and 61); Dageby (2003): interview 2003-06-17.

Let me now shift focus to a local practice in Uppsala. In this university town with rich academic traditions, musicians and activists had started a local music house – Uppsala Musikforum [Music Forum] – in 1972. Uppsala Musikforum identified itself as being part of the music movement and encouraged musicians and activists in other cities to set-up their own music houses. In the mid-seventies, there were over 70 such houses throughout the country, often being named “Musikforum” as a postfix. Uppsala Musikforum developed a very fruitful collaboration with not only the music movement but also with the local authorities, as well as state authorities such as the National Institute for Concerts and the National Council for Cultural Affairs.

Uppsala Musikforum was invited in the committee for the Alternative Festival. It was decided within the committee that Uppsala Musikforum should organize a local version of the Alternative Festival, albeit on a smaller scale. According to a trendsetting local activist and amateur musician, it was considered natural to work out a local arrangement if you considered yourself a part of the music movement.¹⁴ The Uppsalian Alternative Festival started on Wednesday the 19th of Mars and finished on Saturday the 22nd (the same day the Eurovision Song Contest was carried out in Stockholm). The first day of the event had an international theme, with performances by Fungus (folk rock from Holland) and Karaxú (folk music by Chilean refugees living in Paris, see above). The Norwegian jazz-rock group Moose Loose also played, as did the local folk musicians Henry and Ceylon Wallin, and the local rock band Sammetstunnelbanan [transl. Velvet Underground]. The first evening was completed with a theatrical performance about commercial culture.¹⁵

On Friday the 21st, the theme was national. The programme started with the Uppsalian artist Benkt Öberg, who held a speech on the subjects of commercialism and freedom of speech. The live music started with Jocularores Upsaliensis (a local classical ensemble), and continued with the rock band Hirvi, and then the jazz quintet Kalla Kåren (both acts were local). A dance section took over, with old dance styles and accompaniment by two accordionists from Väveriet Nordviror. The evening was rounded off by a performance by Samla Mamma's Manna, a local professional rock band that was extremely popular within the music movement.¹⁶

On the last day, the theme had a Nordic tinge, with the folk music group Pokkabot from Iceland, and the singer Raya with trio performing gypsy music from Finland. There was also a section for the children with Lars Hedberg's Musiklådan [Music Box], and various activities and plays. Finally, the evening finished off by watching the Eurovision Song Contest on TV.¹⁷ It is interesting to note that the activists actually did participate in the Eurovision Song Contest, however passively, by watching it on television. This may seem as a paradox but underlines the complexity of the situation. The Uppsalian arrangement of a local version of the Alternative Festival was ambitious and clearly stated that Uppsala Musikforum wanted to do its part as a member of the music movement and the counterculture. However, the event did not gain much media exposure and it was sort of hidden in the background of the grand manifestation of the Alternative Festival in Stockholm.

The brief case studies of Sprängkullen and Uppsala Musikforum gives an indication of how local practices and subcultures within the music movement dealt with the Eurovision Song

¹⁴ Folke (2003): interview 2003-04-15; Nylén (1976).

¹⁵ Uppsalakommittén för en alternativ festival (1975b).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Contest and the Alternative Festival. The music houses of Gothenburg and Uppsala each contributed to the countercultural manifesto against commercialism and a streamlined musical landscape, but they did it in their own different ways. Sprängkullen sought total independence from the bourgeois public sphere, while Uppsala Musikforum rejected the market but cooperated with the authorities. All the same, in a historical sense, the decentralized activities of those local practices and subcultures were overshadowed by the main Alternative Festival that took place in Stockholm. In fact, local arrangements of an alternative kind were held in no less than about fifteen Swedish towns. This article examines only two of them, although one could argue that those two were the most vital manifestations outside Stockholm.¹⁸

The hosting of the international Eurovision Song Contest in Stockholm in 1975 proved an excellent opportunity to combine music with politics.¹⁹ The committee of the Alternative Festival did so in a most successful way. They applied avant-garde ideas and created a subaltern counter-public sphere, if only for a short while.²⁰ It confronted and opposed the commercial record industry and the priorities of the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation. By doing so, it actually convinced the establishment that a broader range of musics should be exposed in the media. The Alternative Festival also succeeded in showing visiting journalists from all over Europe that Sweden had something special and interesting going on.²¹ Lundberg, Malm and Ronström points out the general importance of media exposure.²² Through visibility, peripheral actors, groups or even countries can obtain power. The Alternative Festival made the Swedish arrangement of the Eurovision Song Contest in 1975 really stand out, albeit in a somewhat strange way, and in doing so actually contributed to hype Swedish popular music.

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¹⁸ Cf. Thyren (2009).

¹⁹ Bjurström (1983: 113).

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