

'A mind song never really gets wings.'

For the past 37 years, Norwegian band a-ha has never been completely out of the picture (their retirement fund 'Take On Me' has racked up no less than 1.5 billion views on YouTube!). This week sees the release of 'True North': twelve new songs, with symphonic accompaniment courtesy of the Arctic Philharmonic. The concert film of the same name saw a limited release in cinemas worldwide, and will soon be released on Blu-ray and streaming. Belgian newspaper 'De Morgen' had the immense honour of speaking to and with singer Morten Harket (63) about the past, the present, the future, influences and the wrong kind of party.



a-ha has done straight pop, moody rock, and everything in between, but you have rarely mentioned your roots. With 'True North', you guys seem to finally acknowledge Norway and/or Norwegian culture. Was that a conscious decision?

Morten Harket: 'Consciously, yes, in the sense that it didn't just happen. I don't think we've ever denounced being Norwegian in any kind of way. We grew up in the sixties and seventies. For us, as teenagers, there just wasn't any pop/rock scene in Norway. We were not into classical music. So the world of rock-leaning-towards-pop seemed to be our place, and that was America and the United Kingdom - especially in those days. That was our association, that was our musical identity. We grew up in a time when the world needed to embrace the global scale of things. For us, rather than being sticking to our home stuff, it was also a sense of yearning towards international connections. That's where we came from. For me, I never thought of 'True North' as an embracing of Norway – but it is. Nature wise, it is. But not instead of or as opposed to. I embrace nature, period, no matter where I am. It was nice to be connected to and do something in Norway, especially in places we've never recorded in before. We had never played with the Orchestra. It's a good thing, I think. But it doesn't hold an agenda. But that's not what you were suggesting, were you?'

I meant it in a positive way, of course. You've been professional musicians for over forty years, but your home country has very few mentions in the a-ha discography. I can only think of the lyric 'Will she laugh at my accent and make fun of me?' in your song 'The Blue Sky'. Other than that, the a-ha songs could be about anyone or coming from anyplace.

MH: 'That's a line from Pål's (Pål Waaktaar-Savoy, guitarist and songwriter) lyrics, written in the early days of 1983, when he was sat in a coffee shop in West End London. 'The Blue Sky' was the name of a coffee shop/restaurant with tacky plastic tables.'

You've lived the a-ha story. It's been quite a wild ride. A few years ago, there was a 5-disc reissue of a-ha's debut album 'Hunting High and Low'. The early, alternate mixes are on the fourth disc, and they offer a fascinating insight into the making of an a-ha song. There's an early mix of 'The Blue Sky' with an alternate intro in which you guys speak Norwegian. What are you saying to each other?

MH: 'I can't say I ever heard that mix (laughs). I don't remember, not off the top of my head. That was just our lives. You're talking about a very particular point in time. I'd have to sit down and listen to it to answer your question. Mags (Magne Furuholmen, keyboards) might be able to tell you.'

Was it the first time The Arctic Philharmonic collaborated with pop musicians?

MH: 'That I don't know. It's a risky thing to combine pop music with orchestral music, and I didn't really involve myself much in the process because it's not really my field. You'd have to ask Pål or Mags, they were hands-on involved in the production of their songs. The twelve songs on 'True North' are all Pål's or Mags's. I tend to take my own stuff out of a-ha, it's better. There's no rule, but there's so much material between the other two, and it's just become the way to do it.'

I'd love to correct you on that. Your songs 'To Let You Win' and 'Forever Not Yours' are classic a-ha ditties, truly worthy efforts.

MH: 'I know (laughs). It has happened, on certain occasions. But I do feel I sometimes drown in the songwriter identity somehow, because there's just too much material written by the guys. Not that it couldn't be done, but hey, it's easier. It's just easier.'

Both 'Brother' and 'Wild Seed' are gorgeous Morten Harket albums.

MH: 'They're the most focused ones.'

You have nothing to be ashamed of. You've done some beautiful stuff on your own.

MH: 'I don't feel shame at all. If anything, it would broaden the footprint of a-ha in a positive way if we were all to contribute songs together. But there's just too much of everything.'

Do you remember the very first song you've ever written? And how old were you?

MH: 'I didn't play tunes on the piano like many 4 or 5-year-olds. That aside, 'Lay Me Down Tonight' was the first one. I initially wrote it in my early twenties, but I didn't pick it up again to finish it until 1995 for the 'Wild Seed' album.'

You were a big fan of Uriah Heep. Have you ever attempted to make those kinds of songs?

MH: 'Not really. Not like that. They turned me on to modern music in the first place. I was completely captivated by their discography when I was fifteen or sixteen. I stayed true to the Heep stuff for a long time. They're very strong melodically. Then came the love for David Bowie, Deep Purple, Pink Floyd, Queen in a big way. Early Queen was really strong. When I discovered Led Zeppelin, that was something else. But the main shock for me was hearing Jimi Hendrix for the first time. That became a departure from the past in a sense. It was a pivotal moment in my musical upbringing.'

You were eleven years old when Hendrix passed away. Do you remember hearing the news?

MH: 'No. I discovered that later on. I was seventeen, heard Hendrix, and stopped playing music completely. I heard his music, nicked the record - which I haven't done before or since (laughs) - took it home, didn't play it, and stood there in shock for quite a long period of time. It stopped me dead in my tracks. It stayed like that for a while, I had to readjust myself.'

A lot of musicians have that pivotal moment. Nick Cave once said he was eating in a restaurant, heard Bob Dylan, and said he couldn't eat another bite. And he didn't understand why no one else around him felt the same way.

MH: 'I agree. For me, it was Hendrix. The Doors were another story, I didn't really know about them. I sort of slipped into them, when I met the other guys. They were huge Doors fans. I was responded immediately to James Douglas Morrison, it was brilliant.'

You can hear it on the first Bridges album 'Fakkeltog'.

MH: 'Yeah, it's very Doors influenced, I agree. Very much so.'

Said Bridges album only came out on 1000 copies back in 1980, and costs upwards of \$1000. Sadly for me, haha. You should tell the guys, if they still have their copy.

MH: 'Oh really? I'll leave them in the dark (laughs)'

When you're writing lyrics for a new song, do you think in Norwegian or do you think in English?

MH: 'In English. When I'm writing a song for a Norwegian language album, sure, it'll be in Norwegian. But mostly in English. I can choose the mindset for the song, that's the way it goes. I'm speaking to you now in English, and I think in English. I'm not translating myself in my head.'

I love the 1993 album 'Memorial Beach', but it's not the most popular a-ha record. Am I correct to assume that you guys didn't really know where to take the record? Because it's so dark and different.

MH: 'No, I think it was more a question of where to take the band. Because we all felt deeply fed-up with the pop hysteria and we hadn't been able to shake it off properly. It's a response and a reaction to the charts and all of that. We did it with the previous album too, 'East of the Sun West of the Moon', but possibly even more so with 'Memorial Beach'. It was Pål's departure in a way, it's more his album. After that, we just drifted apart really. I went on to do the 'Wild Seed' album.'

'East of the Sun West of the Moon' still had a few uplifting songs, whereas 'Memorial Beach' is all dark and moody. It's not a party album.

MH: 'That would be the wrong kind of party (laughs)'

There's a lot of rumours and stupid stories on the internet, so please allow me to check one. Is it true that David Lynch ripped off the a-ha song 'Sycamore Leaves'?

MH: '(chuckles) Not that I know of. But I remember both songs being quite uncanny. There was a sort of embracing of the same sentiment, lyrically as well. But that's not coming from me, at all. I remember it being talked about at the time. I'd need to hear Lynch's song again, I haven't heard it in a long time. What is the song called again? It was for 'Twin Peaks', right?'

'Sycamore Trees', if I'm not mistaken. So it even includes the word 'Sycamore', which is peculiar to say the least.

MH: 'Yeah, but I think that points to it not being a rip-off in a way. Because it would be a little strange to do it that way. I don't know.'



You've been around, you've been abroad, you've visited almost every country on the planet. What was the most unexpected moment you ever heard your own voice in the wild?'

MH: 'Oof, I have no idea. It's been a part of what my life is like for so long. When an a-ha song pops up somewhere, nothing surprises me. It does go worldwide. I remember the first time I went into the Amazon rainforest in 1989. For the first time since we made it, I assumed – without knowing – that I was free to just be me. No fame, no band, no celebrity culture. I was just some guy trekking into the Amazon. I didn't realize until I hit an embankment after a boat ride on the first day. I come back in, there's an Indian village, and I hear this noise rising. The ground is even shaking a little. A big flock of women from this village, thundering down towards the river, where we were approaching and about to land. Word has it that it's me, that I have arrived in the area or whatever. They just come floundering down the embankment, straight on to the boat, they hit me like a ton of bricks. That's what it felt like. I stopped them like a meat cleaver, because they're not stopping. We're not talking hundreds, but at least thirty women. It took me completely – not by surprise, but it was so unexpected. I didn't for a second think that anyone out there would know about me. They all had clippings and cut-outs in the village. I thought I was free for once, and that was a shock to the system. I realized for the first time there is really nowhere I can go.'

Perhaps the only place you're still relatively unknown, is in the United States themselves.

MH: 'Not the case, sadly. It's much the same, because 'Take On Me' has been going relentlessly since it was released. So in America they don't really know a lot about our other songs, but they know the one hit.'

A plethora of remixes came out in the 80s, were these commissioned by the label? Or did you have a say in the matter?

MH: 'Good question. That's something Mags would know. He was more involved in remixes. I never cared about those things.'

Sorry for asking!

MH: 'No, that's okay. I think it was a combination of both. It would come from the outside, but there was an expectancy to do more, club mixes, all kinds of different stuff. Latching on to something that was commercially worth doing for the company, and for us, was part of what was going on. But it was never a big focus for us. Mags was actively involved in it. Was it mixed in Paris? I remember that, I was there. I joined him for that.'

Final question. Famous Italian producer Giorgio Moroder worked with Daft Punk on a biographical 9-minute epic called 'Giorgio by Moroder'. In the bridge, he says 'Once you free your mind about the concept of harmony and of music being correct, you can do whatever you want'. Do you agree?

MH: 'Yeah, it's true. When you write songs for real, it's not something you make up, it's not something you think of. You can do that, and you can play around with it, but you need to let go at the same time. Be responsive and be attentive to what is there. You need to basically shut up, and be quiet, be small, be little, to allow for these things to happen. Because they have their own spirit in a way, powerfully so. When you truly create something, it's something that goes from not being into being. It pops and springs into being from having not been – in a not measurable amount of time. It's instantaneous. Suddenly, you're aware of this presence and this identity. That is your moment to not be disturbed by anyone, including yourself. So that you can translate it into a language that is communicable to others, as well as yourself. By the notes and by playing it on the guitar, recording it quickly and getting it down. You capture it, and then it's there in the morning next time when you wake up or whatever happens in between. If you don't do it right away, or if you're not there, it will be gone. That's kind of relating to what he's saying. You don't make a song. You don't construct it in your head. I'm not saying you can't. Essentially, if it's kind of a mind song it never really gets wings, if you ask me. It's a fascinating area, because it's the one thing that points to something coming out of nothing becoming something. Just like the universe has sprung into existence without us understanding where it comes from. Seemingly from nothing. We don't understand how we are here in the first place, how the universe can be here. Because there's no outside to the universe, only an inside. It doesn't exist from the outside. This is a big, fundamental question in life, which is fascinating to me. When we create something, there's something here, in the process of creation that is linked to this big question.'

That's a very profound answer, Mr Harket, thank you very much. I have to wrap it up. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

MH: 'It's been a pleasure.'

I really hope to see you again on stage, come to Belgium whenever you want, and good luck with 'True North'. Thank you, sir. Have a nice day.

MH: 'Thank you so much, hope to see you too. Bye.'