

Finnkampen: Finland's Envy for Swedish Pop Music Success in the 1990s

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This article is about what I would call potential or conceivable stardom. More precisely, it is about the dream of international popular music stardom in the 1990s in Finland. This was some time before Finnish pop and rock started to gain attraction in international markets. It has been only after year 2000 that groups such as HIM, Nightwish, Apocalyptica, The Rasmus and Lordi have been chart-toppers in number of countries and sold millions of records. In the 1990s, Finnish performers did not enjoy notable success outside Finland. There was, however, a constant flow of discussion about the fame and the possibility of ‘big breakthrough’. In fact, such speculations were one of the main issues in Finnish popular music culture, especially in the pop and rock press.

My article is about potential stardom but it is also about the media and national identity. Graeme Turner writes in his book *Understanding Celebrity* (2004, 102) that celebrity is “one of the primary locations where the news and entertainment media participate in the construction of cultural identity”. One area of cultural identity is national identity. In fact, I would even argue that celebrity and national identity have a shared history which is connected to the rise of entertainment industry, birth of nation states and the overall development of modernisation. This is, however, an area I will not enter here. Turner (104) also points out that even though national identities have been one of the primary focuses in cultural studies, the relationship between celebrities and national identity (something that was, according to Turner, important in Richard Dyer’s *Stars* and *Heavenly Bodies*) has not been taken into consideration. In the discussion of global celebrities and stars, the focus is rarely upon conceptions of national identity. Turner (105) writes that there is one category of celebrity where the consideration of stars’ relation to national identity is unavoidable. Sports celebrities are still largely constructed through their connection to national identity.

Turner’s book is one of the most significant insights of the subject of celebrity but I think he is partly wrong with the argument on celebrity and nationhood. In the field of popular music studies, there actually have been investigations which have more or less touched upon the relationship between music stars and national identity

(e.g. Marcus 1976; Frith & Horne 1987; Savage 1992; Kallioniemi 1998; Zuberi 2001; Mäkelä 2004; Regev & Seroussi 2004). Popular music is a fine example of how the connection between the nation and celebrity is not exclusively confined in the site of sports. Popular music has been an area where stars have been high profile members of their national community and even perceived as ambassadors for their country. They have provided arguments about the nation in international contacts and relations. A classic example is that of the Beatles in the 1960s. The rise of the pop group from Liverpool first strengthened the new sense of local pride (the North in Britain) and then acted as an instrument for national feelings (Britain in the world).

I am here particularly interested in the ‘competitive argument’ that the relationship between popular music and the nation has brought up. The biggest celebrities and stars work across cultural domains yet they also seem to incorporate competitive elements that are both national and international. Generally, national cultures are produced transnationally at least in two ways. First, national symbols such as national songs, hymns or nationalised folk dances are internationally acknowledged and, in fact, often fancied after international models. More importantly, these same nationally meaningful symbols receive their meaning as national symbols in the context of providing competitive arguments in international contacts and relations. Their distinctiveness is sought transnationally. This is to say that national cultures are produced transnationally on international arenas of discourse and competition. (Anttonen 1996, 71–72)

My argument here is: Even though Finnish popular music lacked international star names in the 1990s, the idea of such an option was very much alive and closely in connection to national identity. There are several reasons why ‘big breakthrough’ became so obsessive in 1990s Finnish pop and rock discourse. This paper focusses on one aspect only: Sweden as a reference point of fame and cultural competition. Why Sweden? What kind of competition?

Roots of Envy

In Sweden, popular music rose to new heights of export success in the 1980s and 1990s. A number of performers, including Europe, Roxette, Ace of Base, Army of Lovers, The Cardigans, Dr Alban, and A-Teens, became known in world markets while producers such as Max Martin received recognition of their contribution to the international success of several pop recordings. Swedish recording industry also started to gain significant overseas income from publishing, copyrights and performances. In the mid-1990s, it was reported that only the USA and the UK had higher export figures for popular music than Sweden. (Burnett 2001)



This development was followed with envy in Finland. When reporting about Swedish success stories, it became a tendency for journalists to cry ‘Why Swedes again?’ or ‘In pop business Sweden is ten years ahead of Finland’ (some said 25 years). Such an attitude has its roots in the 1950s when Finnish music papers, including *Musiikkiviesti* and *Musiikki-Revy*, started to compare the two music scenes. This comparison was first seen in the field of jazz. It was reported that Sweden’s jazz scene is characterised by active entrepreneurship, talented musicians and well-oiled contacts with star names of American jazz – all which were seen to lack from the Finnish scene. The tone of the envy, however, was not very bitter.



During the 1960s, Finnish music press regularly compared Finnish music scenes, performers and fashions to those of Sweden. It was during this time that differences between the neighbouring countries were postulated. Isto Lysmä, the editor of music journal *Suosikki*, often wrote how Finland is backwater of popular music – especially if compared with the development in Sweden. Another magazine, *Iskelmä* (11/1963), noted that Swedish instrumental guitar groups are much more professional than Finnish ones. According to the editor of the magazine, Erkki Pälli, Swedish music was “five years ahead of Finnish music” (9/1967).

These tones deepened in the 1970s when Swedish pop group Abba became an international star name. It could be argued that the success of Abba very much haunted the discussion of the international in Finnish pop music up until the 1990s.

It was regularly acknowledged that the ‘Finnkampen’, to use a term associated with the annual track and field sports match between the two countries, was highly unbalanced: Sweden had a legion of internationally recognised star performers, Swedish musicians were more prepared and open-minded to international networking, and the industry had more resources than the one in Finland. Furthermore, Sweden’s popular music policy, especially education and promotion, was seen much more developed. Sweden even had a special agency, Export Music

Sweden, which was formed already in 1993 with the aim of “initiating, assisting and facilitating the promotion and marketing” of domestic popular music (ExMS 2007).

In regards with Sweden’s success, the lack of international Finnish star name became a symbol of the nation that had culturally failed in global markets.¹ Even though certain Finnish performers actually gained cult status (e.g. humour rock group Leningrad Cowboys) and genre-based success (metal groups) in European markets and elsewhere, the media discussion on the nation’s music export was not characterised by the triumph but the feeling of failure. It is of course possible to perceive Finnkampen in popular music as just another extension of the long cultural, economic and political rivalry, which has its roots in the Sweden’s dominion of Finland for over six hundred years (ca. 1200–1809). In any event, this competition was taken to a new level in the 1990s when cultural activities in Western countries became increasingly understood as a field of trade and economy.

In Finland, the catchphrase ‘competitive society’ characterised discussions about economy, politics and also cultural life (Alasuutari 1996; Heiskala & Luhtakallio 2006). Culture was increasingly perceived with respect to globalisation which was mainly seen as an economic programme and challenging neoliberal order free from various regulations. One of the impacts of various processes of globalisation was that policy-makers were forced to re-think their understanding of just what culture is. In the discussion about competitive society, popular music was no longer laid in the margins of capital-C Culture but seen as an exciting cultural location where songs and performers constructed ideas about national identity and cultural interaction. This largely explains why Sweden’s pop fame was followed with envy in Finland.

Coping the Envy

How was the envy for Sweden’s success dealt with in Finland? One method to cope with the Finnkampen was to label Swedish popular music as having suspicious and notorious sides unknown to Finnish scene. This often took form of stereotyping. *Suosikki* (2/1964), for example, wrote about the so-called mod style which had come to Finland via Sweden and threateningly encouraged young boys to do make-up and use feminine-like dresses. Erkki Pälli of *Iskelmä* (10/1967) took this view further when claiming that Swedish pop stars are often trapped with money, pornography and “homophile” attitudes. Such critical voices reflected those opinions about the twisted nature of Swedish male sexuality that had been already presented in popular magazines and films (see Juvonen 2002).

Stereotypes aside, the most important theme that emerges here is the relationship between authenticity and nationality. In the history of exporting Finnish popular music the question of Finnishness has always been very crucial and occasionally debated as well. Should Finland export music that sounds ‘Finnish’? What should be thought about Finnish music that sounds international and might as well come, for example, from Sweden?

The jealousy towards Sweden’s pop oeuvre was accompanied by critical arguments about the inauthentic and ‘placeless’ nature of Swedish stars and their music. This started already in the 1960s when *Suosikki* (4/1966) argued that most Swedish pop groups only imitate British pop music and “do not have their own styles”. It became more distinctive with the success of Abba in the 1970s when the so-called cultural imperialism thesis (see Mitchell 1996; Shuker 2001) was often used in popular music discourses as a way to label certain successful pop artists and groups. Abba was seen to represent commercial and inauthentic music, merely a capitalist marketing device than a success with true aesthetic merits. If Abba was discussed in the Finnish mainstream media, the focus was on Abba’s business deals, finances and commercial success, which were regularly seen as somehow suspicious sides of Abba fame. In fact, such arguments were at the time very popular also in Sweden where the critique against Abba came to a large extent from the leftist Music Movement (Broman 2003).

Even though the cultural imperialism argument began to lose its relevance in the so-called postmodern condition when diversification of styles, splintering of genres, breakdown of master narratives, recyclings of past forms, and narratives of irony replaced the old ideological stance in popular music, it was still regularly brought up. Finnish press often complained that those Swedish acts, who had won international fame, did not sound ‘Swedish’ at all, or that the star artists themselves could not be identified as representing Swedishness. The absence of national identity and nationalism was not understood as a positive value. When Finnish acts, for example the Leningrad Cowboys and hybrid-metal act Waltari, gained some attraction in Europe, their attitudes and aesthetic choices were associated with Finnishness and Finnish way of making music. Swedish pop music, on the other hand, was labelled placeless and international.

This discussion reveals how especially in the field of rock journalism there still was a tendency to bring place, identity and music together in the name of authenticity. For critics, Swedish pop music was not authentic because

its roots did not seem to lay in any particular ethnic or historical context. Within this discussion it was forgotten that the origins of modern Swedish pop music do not lie in primitive and ethnic folk music cultures, i.e. 'authentic' forms of national cultures. As argued by music historian Lars Lilliestam (1998, 67–68), they lie in the rich cultural interaction and the development of urban society. In their study on music, identity and place, John Connell and Chris Gibson (2002, 124–125) write that Swedish national music did not emerge as a product of overt nationalism but through the ways in which music was constructed for export and received by global audiences. Looking at the music-national dialects from this perspective, one may conclude that Swedish popular music in the 1990s actually was very much Swedish. It did not germinate from the folk tradition. The context from where Roxette and many other success stories emerged was the context of urban society and the cultural interaction that so deeply characterised Swedish society in the 20th century and still does.

I think that this context of modernity was slowly recognised also in Finland. Which leads me to the second point I want to make here. Not only was Sweden's success envied. It also provided a model for the reconfiguration of Finnish popular music. Sweden's success in global pop markets effectively contributed to Finland's mission for international fame.

From Jealousy to Actions

Pressures to win international pop fame gradually became unbearable in Finland. What followed was that more organised actions were taken. For example: the annual event of the music industry, Music & Media, which had been established in 1989, took pop export one of its main concerns. Record company executives started increasingly to participate international music industry events such as Midem in Cannes and Popkomm in Berlin. National training programme for rock managers started in 1997. Two major reports (Ahonen et al. 1998; Mikkola et al. 1998) focussing on the internationalisation of Finnish popular music were published. Both of them proposed that the state-supported agency for pop and rock export coordination should be established. Finally in 2002, a partly state-funded major organisation, Music Export Finland, was founded.

It was especially in the field of recording industry that attempts to learn something from Sweden's success became important. In that field it was not that crucial whether a celebrated artist or group represented Finnishness or not. What was important was the success itself. What happened was that there was an increasing interest in new kind of star images and stylised pop leanings that resembled attitudes in Sweden. Two cases illustrate this.

First, a Finnish rock group called Neljä ruusua ('Four Roses') changed its name to 4R and released two albums in English in the mid-1990s. Prior to this, the group had recorded only in Finnish. The group's albums had regularly topped the charts in Finland and received critical acclaim. Having thus gained everything that there was possible to gain in domestic markets, the group decided to try their luck outside Finland. The new albums were produced by EMI, or its Finnish branch, which then tried to promote them through other EMI branches in different countries and regions. This method did not work. Other branches were not interested in marketing and distributing an unknown Finnish pop group.



In Finland, the transformation of the group from modern guitar rock performed in Finnish to modern dance/techno rock performed in English was first seen as a bold effort and then as an inauthentic career move. The Finnish pop and rock media in particular were very harsh and showed no mercy towards the group. A critic in the rock magazine *Rumba* wrote about the 4R's first English album, *Mood*, that it sounds like a "master parody of the pursuit for international fame" (Räikkä 1996). The second attempt, *Not for Sale*, met similar response. According to another critic representing *Rumba*, the great paradox was that whereas Neljä ruusua had truly sounded international, 4R was like a Finnish country boy "blind-dating Depeche Mode" (Knuuti 1997). Clearly there was a feeling that the group had failed and, in a sense, betrayed its local fans.

Second example is the attempt to sell Miisa and her mainstream soul-dance pop to American markets during 1995 and 1996. Miisa's career was widely reported and

speculated in the Finnish pop and mainstream press. Miisa had released only one album in Finland when an American talent scout, who had come to Finland to look for new acts, found her and then sent her to Atlanta to sign a 3 million dollar deal with Ichiban, one of the biggest independent record companies in America. Miisa's manager, record company executives, people working in the music business, other authorities and, of course, the artist herself were asked about her chances. High hopes were laid – yet suspicions were articulated as well.

There was some criticism that the project called Miisa was not an authentic artist-based venture but an artificial project with an emphasis on the manufactured product rather than the real person. Miisa's authenticity was questioned in three ways. First, she did not follow the traditional career process of the gradual build-up of a following from regional to national and then international stages. Resembling a typical career pattern to Swedish acts and artists, Miisa seemed to appear out of nowhere, or, rather, she seemed just another music industry fishing from what Simon Frith (1998) calls the "talent pool". Second, Miisa was juxtaposed with the particular ethos that had just before her entrée characterised the internationalisation of Finnish pop music: male-oriented rock Finnishness. Miisa did not represent the paid-his-dues ethos which had been prevalent in efforts of exporting Finnish popular music. During the 1980s and the early 1990s the most visible attempts to obtain international fame were taken by male groups playing hard rock and writing their own music. As opposed to them, Miisa was a young stylish woman singing mainstream dance pop written by professional songwriters.

Third argument relates to the issue of controlship. It seemed that Miisa did not have any control over her products and that she was merely a puppet on a string singing what her masters asked her to sing. It was, for example, reported that Miisa was forced to change her music style from techno pop to modern r&b in order to appear as an Ichiban artist aiming at American markets. Had the press realised that Miisa did not sing in her own records she would have met even harsher criticism about the lack of her controlship. According to Miisa's manager Chris Owen (2002, 90–91), Miisa was just a face for the latest pop coup. In reality, her songs were recorded by a Swedish woman called Karin. Whatever the truth behind the controlship is, the fact remains that for a brief time Miisa raised some interest in the US markets and pop media but for various reasons she soon disappeared from public view.

In the cases of 4R and Miisa, the exportation of popular music were not taken as authentic attempts. They did not represent authentic Finnish music and celebrity. But what if they had succeeded? Things would have probably taken different routes. They certainly did soon after. When the electro-hiphop group Bomfunk Mc's and the techno pop artist Darude conquered pop charts in 2000 with their hit songs 'Free-styler' and 'Sandstorm', respectively, there was not any suspicion in Finland about their Finnishness. Placeless and inauthentic celebrity, the theme that once had characterised Finnish music discourse, was wiped out almost in one night. High visibility of the performers in international markets was seen to represent the success of the local in the global.

Coda

It can be said that since the breakthrough year 2000, Finnish popular music has not envied Swedish popular music to a same extent as before. Finnish popular music has been doing relatively well in international markets and at the same time the media together with the recording industry have successfully created a story that this all has something to do with the Finnish way of making music rather than, for example, the changes in global music markets. However, as the industry follows the nothing-is-enough logic, something is still left from the old envy.



In January 2006, a group of high-profile people, including Ville Valo of the rock group HIM, manager Seppo Vesterinen, producer Asko Kallonen, and philosopher Pekka Himanen, organised a media event together with the Ministry for Trade and Industry, and the University of Art and Design Helsinki. In their music export proposal to minister Mauri Pekkarinen, the members of the work group stated that in Sweden music export brings 200 million euros yearly whereas in Finland the sum is only 23 million euros. The message was clear: Sweden's music industry and pop export are much more profitable and healthier than the ones in Finland. If Finland wants to develop its status as successful music producer and compete with Sweden, more efficient actions must be conducted. The work group then pleaded with the government to launch a new contribution of one million euros per year for music export. (Mattila 2006)

The old jealousy towards Sweden's success in popular music may have abated but not totally. The envy and its accompanying criticism about inauthentic popular music first changed to expectations and then to aggressive demands. After the new international success story of Finnish popular music, the government clearly became more sympathetic towards rock and pop while music business took a chance to ask more effective export policy. The above-mentioned media event is only one example of how the comparison between Finland and Sweden has been used as an instrument for demanding more support from the state. Panel discussions and reports on music export often refer to the situation in Sweden. Thus, what could be said is that the envy might still be lurking in Finnish popular music but its focus has shifted from aesthetical issues to the questions of cultural policy and competitive nation in global flow.

Notes

- ¹ Nowhere else was this better recognized than in the Eurovision Song Contest. By 1999, Sweden had won the contest four times whereas Finland had only reached number six at its best and occupied the last placing eight times. Even though the Eurovision Song Contest usually has not played significant role in world music markets, annual disasters gradually became for Finns a national symbol of the failure in international popular music arenas.

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