

**Gendering the Disco Inferno:  
Sexual Revolution, Liberation, and Popular Culture in 1970s America**

**by**

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To my parents

## Acknowledgements

Little did I know it, but this dissertation began more than ten years ago when a friend introduced me to a local Chicago radio station that played all dance music—lots of techno, driving beats, and artist names that I had never heard before and to which my pop-radio-listening friends were oblivious. Going to graduate school, writing a dissertation, even studying history were not on my radar at a time when I was focused on enjoying my last year of high school and choosing the right undergraduate university. But I distinctly remember declaring to my friend that such “dance music” was the disco of the 1990s. He disagreed with me for reasons that were probably more sophisticated but which I only remember as being about a disdain for 1970s disco, a music I had grown up with and enjoyed in its very mainstream representation as part of the local oldies radio station that was a staple of my childhood. While its central topic does not directly address the dispute, I feel like this dissertation was, in some way, a chance for me to offer an extended rebuttal to his claim and defense of my own.

Chicago’s dance music station folded after only a few years, and my historical topics of study in undergrad and my first years of grad school had nothing to do with popular music. For the ultimate inspiration to make disco my dissertation topic I must thank the Henry Ford for bringing to the Detroit area the Experience Music Project’s traveling exhibit *Disco: A Decade of Saturday Nights* and Ray Silverman for requiring my cohort to review it as our first assignment in the Museum Studies Program. I also

must thank Emily Klancher Merchant for not only driving me to the exhibit and enjoying it with me, but also for posing what she probably thought was just an innocuous query to spark conversation: “What I really wonder is what role gender played in this disco story.” My experience with that exhibit combined with Emily’s question led to a seminar paper on Donna Summer, which Mary Kelley helped shape into a study focused on female sexuality that I subsequently presented at our department’s American History Workshop and the Second Biennial Conference for Women and Gender Historians of the Midwest in St. Louis; it also led me to pursue a summer internship at EMP—all of which helped define what this dissertation would become. Special thanks to Jasen Emmons for agreeing to supervise my internship and for later providing me with transcriptions of interviews conducted for EMP’s *Disco* exhibit.

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The University of Michigan's community of scholars provides amazing and nearly constant academic stimulation, but the most important assets it offered me over the last seven years were an invaluable set of friendships, social activities, and support system that made my dissertation experience bearable and all the more enjoyable. I came in with an awesome cohort of students, and I consider myself lucky to have been able to share my time in academia with some of the most inspiring, supportive, and fun people one will ever meet. (The cohorts surrounding my own also included some very special people with whom I am blessed to know and have befriended.) Emily Klancher Merchant sat next to me in our required introductory course and quickly became a good friend; I thank her for all the support and kindness she has shown me. LaKisha Simmons has been one of my favorite people since I met her during my first days in Ann Arbor; her unflinching confidence, academic encouragement, and friendship were bright spots in the many dark moments of coursework and prelims, and I welcomed her returns to Ann Arbor during the dissertation process with great enthusiasm. My free time and social life have been greatly enhanced by my friendships with Alex Lovit and Dan Livesay, cohort members who constantly reminded me that writing a dissertation did not mean locking myself up in my apartment with books and a computer as my only company. Joining Alex and Liz Hudson for the 2008 Donna Summer concert in Winnipeg remains one of

the most memorable (among many) events of my dissertating experience. Dan also provided welcome reprieve from dissertation work when he let me visit him during his research time in Jamaica. Sarah McDermott, another wonderful graduate school friend, offered similar respite by hosting my visit to her Paris apartment, as did Kali Wasenko, who welcomed me to her small studio apartment in Miami. Kali and Sarah offered invaluable laughter and encouragement while I researched and wrote; that Kali wanted to read my dissertation knowing little about it but the subject matter, gave me faith in my topic and a reason to finish. I'm so thankful to Kali for an awesome post-defense celebration in Miami before buckling down with final revisions.

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Like many of those named above, the people I owe the most after all these years have yet to read a single page of this dissertation but have been essential to its completion. My family fits this category best. Even when they did not completely understand what I was doing, why I was still in school, or why I insisted on finishing



something that only seemed to cause me massive amounts of stress, my parents, siblings, and extended family never treated me differently; they simply accepted my stubborn nature and need to complete what I began. I thank my parents for the many care packages sent over the years, especially all the *Friends* DVDs that kept me sane before I discovered “free cable.” Even more, by reminding me every Sunday that there was a bed waiting for me at home, my mom let me know how much she cared in her own unique way. My dad encouraged my interest in history from a young age. He also never failed to let me know how proud he was of what I had already accomplished and that, as much as he knew I was capable, would be proud whether I finished or not. I dedicate this dissertation to my parents because of how this love sustained me and because they are the audience for which I write. As much as I wish to make significant scholarly contributions, I am committed to making my work accessible, interesting, and enjoyable for a non-academic audience. I hope I achieved this goal in what follows, and that those most important to me will soon understand what had me distracted for so many years.

Matt Vanderby came into my life in the final two years of writing my dissertation. As awkward and confusing as it must have been to enter a project and world to which he had no previous exposure (and with a woman who has special skills in complaining and stressing out), his presence meant everything to my sanity, especially in those final months. He accepted my most idiosyncratic traits, indulged my desire to go roller disco, helped calm me when I became overwhelmed with anxiety, showed he cared by making me laugh even at my lowest points, kept me fed when I was convinced time off even to eat would prevent me from finishing on time, and never complained when I put my work ahead of “us.” I’m still amazed he put up with me through it all. I believe the end of this

dissertation is the beginning of a new moment when we can be more readily devoted to each other and a life together. I look forward to seeing where it takes us.

Finally, I must thank the staff of the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, especially of the Microfilm and Interlibrary Loan divisions. Without their services, this dissertation would have been impossible. Thanks also to the librarians and archivists at the following institutions to which I traveled for research: Library of Congress (General Collections, Motion Picture and Television, Rare Book and Special Collections, Performing Arts), Chicago History Museum, Chicago Public Library, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, One National Gay and Lesbian Archives, and the UCLA Film & Television Archive. With all the mass market and published material that made up my source base, I relished the few moments of true archival and manuscript research that made me feel like a “real” historian, even if only a tiny fraction of it found its way into the final text.

It has been a long journey. I am excited to see what comes next.

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the multiple and varied representations of gender and sexuality in the mainstream disco craze of the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. It argues that disco became popular as cultural expression of gender and sexual uncertainty and redefinition as American society came to terms with the changes and tensions of an era of intense and fragmenting social movements including sexual revolution, feminism, gay liberation, Black Power, and human potential. Analyzing disco as a mass-marketed culture that included dancing, fashion, movies, and music, I show how disco incorporated a wide spectrum of gender and sexual possibility that upset conventional boundaries and how popular culture served as a forum for individuals grappling with social movements and changes outside of avowedly political activity and inside a highly commercialized and increasingly sexualized culture. Disco offered women an erotically charged, assertive expression of sexuality influenced by the contentious relationship between feminism and sexual freedom. Participants navigated a tricky path between sexual subjecthood and objecthood, between defining one's own sexuality while avoiding sexual exploitation. Disco's cultural influence also threatened and reshaped dominant modes of masculinity, representing a conflicted and uncertain response to the demands of feminism that challenged and redefined masculine ideals for both whites and blacks while opening avenues for the demonstration and (limited) acceptance of gay pleasure and style.

Highlighting gender and sexuality in disco's mainstream story also pushes past the standard declension narrative of disco drifting into mindless and formulaic

commercialism to see instead the ways in which its mainstream expression held significant meaning and positive potential in shaping the identities and subjectivities of various groups. Most of the scholarship on disco tends to glorify the subversive potential of its underground form among gays and minority groups or uses mainstream disco products only to explore their meanings for homosexuals or to explain the disco backlash. This dissertation, by contrast, emphasizes disco's broad popularity as representative of larger social and cultural trends of the era, arguing that mainstream disco can tell us much about the whole of American gender and sexual culture in that moment of confusion.

## Introduction

Some sociologists believe that discotheques are one place where one can see all the changes that have taken place in the past 10 or 15 years—in the way people think about their bodies, about sex, and about the traditional roles of males and females. They are living galleries where all sexual stereotypes disappear. At discos, you see men dancing with men, women dancing with women, and men and women dancing in groups. Here, a woman alone is not necessarily a “target” for the night; neither is she necessarily looking for Mr. Goodbar.<sup>1</sup>

Kitty Hanson, 1978

Kitty Hanson, New York *Daily News* entertainment journalist and author of an informational book on the disco phenomenon, along with the sociologists to whom she refers were quite perceptive in their reading of disco as a window into the changing gender concepts of the 1970s. Whether or not “all sexual stereotypes disappear[ed]” in any one disco, Hanson and the sociologists she attributes wanted to see these developments, these new and promising gender relations—they wanted to understand disco in these terms. More importantly, by positioning discotheques as “living galleries” that put changes on display, Hanson made those changes present and dynamic—suggesting that what began around 1963 (in her calculations) was still influencing gender relations in 1978. Placing disco within these shifting gender and sexual norms of the 1970s reveals cultural expressions of sexual uncertainty that helped redefine the “traditional” gender order. Disco offered a space in which an array of gender and sexual identities were possible, a space in which the social world of heterosexual, masculine aggression and female sexual passivity could be “re-imagined” to also include practices

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<sup>1</sup> Kitty Hanson, “Tribal Rites—and Fantasies,” *Daily News* (New York), 14 May 1978, 29.

such as homosexuality, androgyny, and female sexual agency within a music that itself mixed cultural influences such as black R&B, Latin rhythms, and orchestral strings.<sup>2</sup> Because of its widespread popularity and links to sexual freedom, disco can teach us something significant about ideas of gender and sexuality just after the height of such movements as women's liberation and sexual revolution.

Highlighting gender and sexuality in disco's mainstream story also pushes past the standard declension narrative of disco drifting into mindless and formulaic commercialism to see instead the ways in which its mainstream expression held significant meaning and positive potential in shaping the identities and subjectivities of various groups. What became the disco craze of the 1970s began early in the decade as an underground scene of house parties and exclusive clubs, the bulk of its membership made up of New York City's gay and minority communities. Defined by the innovative ways in which Disc Jockeys (DJs) mixed a variety of danceable music, this scene celebrated marginality with its embrace of black musical styles and underground club network that served as the cultural meeting points of gay liberation and black expressive culture. By the middle of the 1970s, and increasingly by the end of the decade, disco evolved into a veritable phenomenon. A widely popular musical and entertainment form and a highly visible style that infiltrated numerous facets of American culture—from movies, television, and radio to fashion, toys, and literature. The disco craze encompassed such assorted names and icons as Barry White, the Bee Gees, Grace Jones, the Hustle, Studio 54, and *Saturday Night Fever* and became a culture in which a broad

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<sup>2</sup> Concept of “re-imagining the present social world” borrowed from Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley & LA: University of California Press, 2005). I have extrapolated his concept of audiotopia to include gender and sexuality in addition to nationhood, race, and ethnicity.

swath of demographic categories took part, a cultural product to which many groups laid claim and endowed with meaning. To critics, then and now, disco's commercialized appeal to a larger mainstream drained it of its "authenticity" and subversive potential; yet, it is my contention that disco remained significant even at its most commercial because of its place in history and active engagement with the social tensions of the time. Beneath the flashy veneer of mainstream disco's often choreographed and formulated party were meanings, expressions, and variations that took advantage of the historical moment in order to perpetuate the ideals of lingering social movements, challenge categorical boundaries often taken for granted, and speak to a society in flux. Ultimately, disco's potential for unconventional expression, combined with over-saturation of the marketplace, launched a backlash against the craze simultaneous with its peak years in American culture, climaxing in near-rioting at a Chicago baseball stadium in the summer of 1979, and correlating with a growing backlash against feminism and the rise of New Right conservatism. Yet, disco's downfall in the first years of a new decade did not negate its influence on the redefinition of gender and sexuality in American culture.

Disco provided a source of cultural expression through which men and women performed the many possibilities for masculinity, femininity, and eroticism coexisting in tension after the height of liberation movements and sexual revolution and acted as a cultural indicator of how non-participants understood these movements to have affected their lives. For women, disco offered a more erotically charged, assertive expression of sexuality than the pop or rock that otherwise dominated mainstream music. But this sexual agency simultaneously objectified women for the pleasure of men, causing disco divas and dancers to navigate a tenuous compromise between sexual subjecthood and



objecthood, which paralleled a similarly fraught relationship between feminism and sexual freedom that forced women to navigate a tricky path between defining one's own sexuality while avoiding sexual exploitation. Black divas such as Gloria Gaynor, Donna Summer, and Sister Sledge, who dominated the disco playlist, put forth a range of sexual personas that worked within a feminism increasingly mediated by popular culture and allowed non-movement women to explore sexual freedom while retaining respectability and emotional attachments, if they so chose. Disco's cultural influence also threatened and reshaped dominant modes of masculinity while opening avenues for the demonstration and (limited) acceptance of gay pleasure and style. Even as its mainstreaming minimized and transformed the culture's underground origins, disco retained a connection to minority lifestyles, making it both a threat to the masculinity of straight whites and a cultural space where men could perform expressions of gender and sexuality that were modern and individual. These more modern expressions of masculinity represented a conflicted and uncertain response to the demands of feminism that challenged and redefined masculine ideals for both whites and blacks. Indeed, just as disco would likely not have become so culturally ubiquitous had it not resonated with the experiences of a broad population, it similarly would not have been so demonstrably despised if it simply fit traditional notions of gender and sexuality.

Musical performance had long been an arena where individuals confounded gender categories and challenged social convention, but disco enacted such challenges without claiming to be self-consciously radical or rebellious (like rock 'n' roll or psychedelia). It did so within a mainstream culture and society that took such unconventional expression as part and parcel of changes that had roots in the radical

movements of the sixties and had gradually but substantially transformed the social world in which they lived. And compared to the music scene into which it entered, disco represented a significant break from the status quo, especially for women, gay men, and macho masculinity. Yet, while scholars have given musical genres such as rock 'n' roll, jazz, and the blues their fair share of analysis in terms of how they challenged social conventions, they have not done the same for the mainstream disco craze. The fact that disco held similar significance and meaning remains lost on future generations influenced more by its backlash, tending to understand it as simple party music that, at its most meaningful, helped Americans dance their way through economic recession.

My goal in this dissertation is, in part, to give mainstream disco due credit for the ways in which it upset cultural norms, but it is not to argue that disco *always* held potential to subvert the “traditional” gender order nor even that most aspects of it furthered the liberal tendencies of movements such as feminism, sexual revolution and gay liberation. Much of what came out of mainstream disco—much of the white, straight, suburban experience of disco—was extremely conservative, at times threatening the progress these movements had made. In fact, while Kitty Hanson referenced some sociologists who saw “all sexual stereotypes disappear” at the disco, she also took note of others who warned of discos merely becoming “pleasure palaces of decadent delights.”<sup>3</sup> Combine that with disco’s transformation into big industry focused on profits and the bottom line, the sexual objectification of both men and women, the narcissism involved in putting on such displays, the escapism from a frustrating and increasingly bleak economic and political situation, the fact that an individualized politics of pleasure

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<sup>3</sup> Kitty Hanson, “Disco Fever,” *Daily News* (New York), 13 March 1978, 29.

merely meant the depletion of collective action for change—disco held much evidence of conservatism. What I hope to show, however, is that through analysis of disco’s complex cultural politics, we can better understand why this entertainment form became popular (and bitterly hated) as a way for Americans to work through conflicting understandings of gender and sexuality in their own lives and that disco held potential—however limited—to help men and women move toward a more open and tolerant society.

### **History and Historiography: Sexual Liberation and Disco Studies**

By arguing that disco’s representations of gender and sexuality must be understood in relation to residual influences of the sexual, women’s, and gay liberation movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, I make the impact and evolution of these movements a central aspect of my story and explore the role popular culture played in the creation and dissemination of such ideas. I organize my study around the premise that disco both influenced and was influenced by consumer and performer understandings of feminism and other social movements, arguing that the mass media and culture industry did not merely co-opt and alter movement ideologies, but rather that these ideologies were constituted in and of popular culture.<sup>4</sup> I thus move the study of social movements beyond the realm of organizations, activists, and demonstrative social protest and argue for the significance of individuals grappling with these movements and changes outside

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<sup>4</sup> For example, most studies of mass culture and second-wave feminism, while acknowledging a contradictory presentation of feminist ideas, tend to interpret it as simplifying, distorting, and vilifying, feeding into the backlash against feminism and ultimately always bringing women back to the beautiful object meant to stimulate male desire. See, for example, Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), esp. chaps. 7-12 and Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), esp. 308-327. As whole, the essays in Sherrie A. Inness, ed., *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), also give this impression.

of avowedly political activity and inside a highly commercialized culture.<sup>5</sup> As pointed out by Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley in their edited collection, *Feminism in Popular Culture*, “most people’s initial knowledge and understanding of feminism has been formed within the popular and through representation.” Because of that reality, they argue, we must divest ourselves of the tendency to “presume that a ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ feminism exists outside of popular culture and offers a position from which to judge and measure feminism’s success or failure in making it into the mainstream.” We must, instead, consider seriously what popular culture can tell us about feminism and its multiple meanings and constructions.<sup>6</sup> Changes that had once been the realm of radical youths became everyday reality for the majority of Americans in the 1970s, but how individual members of society accepted or understood those changes was still a matter of debate. That they chose to engage in these debates with the system, rather than against it, and through the language of personal discovery and freedom, rather than social change,

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of making culture political is influenced by Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, & the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); George Lipsitz, “Introduction,” *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); and Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 26-27.

<sup>6</sup> Hollow and Moseley, “Popularity Contests: The Meanings of Popular Feminism,” in *Feminism in Popular Culture* (New York: Berg, 2006), 2, 1. This collection makes an essential contribution to our understanding of feminism in women’s everyday lives. While all but two of the essays focus on “popular feminism” and “post-feminism” in the 1990s, it has greatly influenced my thinking surrounding disco’s relation to feminism and femininity in the 1970s. Furthermore, by connecting disco and its interaction with feminism to the increasingly commodified sexuality of 1970s, I find the origins of “popular” and “Third Wave” feminism that scholars currently attribute to the 1990s. See Angela McRobbie, *In the Culture Society: Art, Fashion and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Jennifer Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) also argues for this connection between the second and third waves. Finally, the following admission by a self-identified feminist of the 1970s is very telling: “I thought to be a feminist you had to be politically active, and I wasn’t . . . It wasn’t until . . . Mimi Schapiro convinced me that feminism is as much a state of mind as a matter of active alliances, that I dared to use the term self-referentially.” Yvonne Rainer, “Skirting,” in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women’s Liberation*, eds. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 447.

should not negate the transformative potential of individuals to define society in ways counter to previous understanding.<sup>7</sup>

To appreciate disco, then, we must understand the sexual context of its era and how it evolved from what came before. The history of American sexual culture is a long story of heated battles between openness and repression and of gradual change, but the 1960s and 1970s earned the label “sexual revolution” because of how youthful rebellion exposed and altered a post-war sexual culture sharply divided by public and private.<sup>8</sup> In an era fixated on “family togetherness,” strong structural and ideological systems governed public sexual behavior in the 1950s and early 1960s: few people admitted to premarital sex; a double standard saddled women with the responsibility of drawing boundaries and labeled them “nice girls” or “bad girls” depending on their sexual proclivities; and gay men and lesbians risked jail for engaging in homosexual activity. Yet, behind closed doors, men and women engaged in forbidden behavior with surprising frequency, and with the social movements of the 1960s, attitudes began to transform so that public dictates began to coalesce with private behavior.<sup>9</sup> How the sexual “revolution” evolved cannot be separated from the ways in which the ideologies of these movements fragmented, splintered, and penetrated mainstream sensibilities.

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<sup>7</sup> Especially helpful in framing my ideas were Beth Bailey and David Farber, “Introduction,” in *America in the Seventies*, eds. Bailey and Farber, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004); Michael Nevin Willard, “Cutback: Skate and Punk at the Far End of the American Century,” in Bailey and Farber, *America in the Seventies*; and David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70s: The Decade that Brought You Modern Life (For Better or Worse)* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), Preface.

<sup>8</sup> For a survey of these changes see Estelle Freedman and John D’Emilio, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Beth Bailey, “Sexual Revolution(s),” in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 235-262. For more on gender and sexual dictates of the 1950s see Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

As historian Steven Seidman has articulated, the 1960s and 1970s experienced a shift in intimate culture in which public discourse and representation espoused a separation of sex from romance and love and sought to legitimize sex as a medium of pleasure and play, of self-fulfillment and expression that need not occur within monogamous, loving relationships.<sup>10</sup> Such ideas emanated most strongly from youth-dominated subcultures such as the political New Left and counterculture, which, in their active and expressive protests against such customs as segregation, rampant anti-communism, and conformity within the capitalist system, formed a youth movement that included sexual liberation under its umbrella. While these youths espoused many different visions of how the sexual culture should transform, their visions all intersected with a quest for personal authenticity and individual empowerment meant to challenge the dominant culture and political system in search of a more open and honest way of life in which they were not obligated to conform to the prudish and “inauthentic” social constraints they saw in the older generation.<sup>11</sup> But the ideology of sex as self-fulfillment also found representation in a sexualized public sphere in which the culture industry used sex to sell a variety of commodities and more readily incorporated sex into films, television, and other entertainment, and a growing sex industry commercialized eroticism in the form of sex manuals, pornography, and sex clubs. Indeed, by the end of the sixties,

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Seidman, “Eros Unbound: Constructing Sex as an Autonomous Domain of Pleasure,” in *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 121-156.

<sup>11</sup> My understanding of the 1960s youth movement and its relation to sex comes from a variety of secondary sources including Jim Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Alexander Bloom, *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2001); Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Farber, *The Sixties*; and Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, eds., *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Especially helpful was Doug Rossinow’s essay “‘The Revolution Is About Our Lives’: The New Left’s Counterculture” in *Imagine Nation*.

such commercialized sexuality had helped the countercultural ethos become a generally accepted standard in American society such that many countercultural symbols became popular trends whether or not one was self-consciously radical, and there occurred a general relaxation of culture, especially in the cultural norms of sex.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, the sexual politics of the New Left and counterculture were highly masculinist and heterosexual, serving as impetus for new movement outgrowths such as women's and gay liberation that reshaped the sexual revolution as it continued into the 1970s. Focused on a quest for an authentic masculinity that "often cast women in the role of sexual helpmeets, albeit newly uninhibited ones," the sexual revolution of the 1960s opened the realm of sexual activity and expression for a young generation, but it did little to breakdown the sexual double standard or heteronormativity.<sup>13</sup> As women fought for sexual agency, the sexual revolution in the 1970s expanded to include women taking control of their own sexuality and breaking free from the exploitative power of sex, men responding in multiple ways to these newly liberated women, and both trying to understand each other as human beings not necessarily bound by strict gender roles and sexual dictates. This expanded sexual revolution also encompassed gay men and lesbians finding pride in their identity as homosexual and celebrating that identity through acceptance of their sexual selves, Americans not actively involved in liberation

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<sup>12</sup> For more on a sexualized culture and the mainstreaming of countercultural norms see Peter Braunstein, "'Adults Only': The Construction of an Erotic City in New York during the 1970s" in *America in the Seventies*, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 129-156; Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Braunstein and Doyle, "Introduction," in *Imagine Nation*, 12; Kenneth Cmiel, "The Politics of Civility," in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 263-290; Schulman, *The Seventies*, 19-20 and Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). On changes in sexual mores, also see D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters* and Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*.

<sup>13</sup> Rossinow, "The New Left's Counterculture," 117.

movements learning to be comfortable with the so-called “new morality” and perhaps participating in and exploring that sexual openness, and a young generation coming of age within a gender system very much in flux.

More than anything, the sexual changes of the 1970s were set within a culture nearly obsessed with the concepts of liberation and individual human potential contributing to an increasingly individualistic, less politically driven, social atmosphere over the course of the decade. The goals of self-empowerment and authentic personal expression became the dominant driving force behind the countercultural ethos as it spread through American society. These goals not only precipitated a variety of cultural liberation movements based on the concept of identity politics, but also caused a devotion to oneself and personal quests to discover one’s true potential as a human being to spread across society in the 1970s, going by a variety of names: human potential, human growth, awareness movement, New Age. In many ways, this inward focus became the dominant political and transformational mode of the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> As these movements entered mainstream media and culture and intersected with the concept of human potential, even social movements based on solidarity began to splinter by the end of the decade. Feminism, for example, originally based on the concept of sisterhood, saw its defense of “the personal is political” work against its group politics in contentious ways. As feminism increasingly proliferated into the mainstream in the mid-1970s, through both movement activity and mass culture, it became more fragmentary and individualized, while also becoming more sensitive to the unique needs of different groups of women,

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<sup>14</sup> This discussion is indebted to Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies*, esp. chp. 3, “Plugging In.”



including various races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and classes.<sup>15</sup> By adapting the premises of feminism and sexual liberation to their own needs, women propounded many different definitions of liberation and sexual freedom. In a nation that had grown fatigued by and distrusting of politics and government in the wake of disturbances like the student movement and Watergate, the notion of self-transformation without an avowedly political dimension took increasing precedence over the course of the decade.

With an emphasis on individual self-fulfillment running through larger culture, the bulk of the 1970s was a moment when personal definitions of pleasure dominated: contradictory and conflicting ideas of what liberation meant coexisted in tension and in dialogue with each other as many Americans questioned “traditional” understandings of gender and sexuality and struggled to reconcile the challenges of a sexualized culture to their personal beliefs and understandings. Different groups and individuals responded to the changes in their own ways, but few went untouched by the confusion engendered from the interactions of sexual revolution, human potential, and liberation. Indeed, sex and liberation had become commodities of the free marketplace to which anyone with a modicum of disposable income had access, and by espousing a kind of libertarian sex ethic in which sex was a realm of pleasure, play, and personal expression, these products helped expand the range of acceptable relationships. In a sense, the 1970s stood as a

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<sup>15</sup> Rosen, “The Proliferation of Feminism,” in *The World Split Open* and Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End* (New York: Free Press, 2003). The rise of identity politics broadened the appeal of personal transformation, but it also splintered the umbrella that was the “Movement” by making the goal more inwardly focused. As the personal became political for growing numbers of Americans, the types of rights-based movements that latched onto this idea also grew. While this concept was galvanizing for groups and empowering for individuals, it had the potential to undermine itself. The liberation movements that grew out of identity politics were inherently political in that they sought to improve the life of the group, but such politics also ran the risk of encouraging a preoccupation with self-transformation that could subordinate group politics to personal lifestyle. See Alice Echols, “Women’s Liberation and Sixties Radicalism” in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 164, for discussion of this tension.

moment of possibility before the re-dominance of loving, monogamous relationships as the normative ideal in the “family values” atmosphere of the 1980s. This is not to say, however, that a liberal atmosphere existed without challenge in the 1970s. Evidence of backlash against disruptions to the “traditional” social order existed early on in the 1970s and grew to new heights by the end of the decade and into the 1980s. A libertarian sex ethic mingled in the popular press with those writers who lamented the sense of a casual sex mandate and general confusion that surrounded them. Many of those who desired to keep sex within the realm loving relationships, however, maintained a commitment to personal choice and accepted the reality of change even as they questioned the value of sexual liberalism and the transformation of gender roles in their own lives. Uncertainty created an era of possibility and a cultural atmosphere in which freedom of choice seemed to reign; society seemed to tolerate, and cultural products often encouraged, individual expression; and bids for equality seemed within reach.<sup>16</sup>

Disco became a mainstream success within these tensions of gender and sexual redefinition and became popular with a broad audience because the liberationist ideologies of the previous decade had infiltrated the larger society. Disco’s success is evidence that a substantial segment of American society had grown more comfortable with previously unconventional cultural practices such as open and expressive sexuality, men who were not always aggressive and stoic, and women and blacks holding equally assertive and active positions as white men (at least on the music scene). The disco craze of the 1970s was a public expression of pleasure for gay men and gave a voice to the

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<sup>16</sup> The idea of a libertarian sex ethos and that 1970s intimate culture “constructed sex simultaneously as a site of love and romance and as a medium of pleasure and self-expression” can be found in Seidman, “Eros Unbound,” *Romantic Longings*, quote from 155. I elaborate on the decade’s sexual confusion and its intersection with feminism in chapter 2.

sexual desires of women, but it also spoke to the uncertain and conflicted ways in which “ordinary” men and women adapted to the demands of earlier social movements as the once radical and youth-oriented concepts infiltrated everyday life in the United States. Disco opened a space for the gradual and uneven redefinition of gender ideologies, and as a cultural form predicated on the ideas of liberation and individuality percolating in the society surrounding it, disco opened avenues to a diverse array of gender and sexual expression for both men and women. It disrupted traditional boundaries of race, gender identity, and proper sexual expression, and did so without directly espousing political agendas or goals, making it accessible to a range of groups and malleable enough to allow for individualized forms of expression—women could be aggressive sexual agents while dressed in sweet, feminine dresses; men could be fashionable peacocks who still adhered to misogynist ideas of male sexual privilege; and a slew of options in between.

My dissertation serves as one of the first studies of disco to place its significance squarely within the historical context of the wider gender and sexual changes of the 1970s, and as such adds to recent scholarship that has sought to reconsider a decade often dismissed as an era of decadence and excess or malaise and recovery after the fiery movements for change of the 1960s. The most recent studies of the decade cogently demonstrate how the upheavals of the 1960s thoroughly shaped the lives of men and women in the 1970s and have made significant steps toward incorporating sophisticated cultural analysis into our understanding of that time.<sup>17</sup> Yet, disco remains a neglected

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<sup>17</sup> J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn: American Thought and Culture in the 1970s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996); Frum, *How We Got Here*; Shelton Waldrep, ed., *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Schulman, *The Seventies*; Inness, *Disco Divas*; Bailey and Farber, *America in the Seventies*; Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); and Levine, *Wallowing in Sex*.

aspect of the stories told in these broad studies of the decade. In most cases, it is entirely absent; in others, it is only cursorily mentioned. Shelton Waldrep's edited collection on "The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture," for example, incorporates disco only in the form of previously published interviews while other cultural forms such as fashion, black action films, and glitter rock receive extended scrutiny. Bruce Schulman, by contrast, offers a brief reading of disco as a last gasp attempt at an integrationist ideal, while Judy Kutulas provides a quick and unkind assessment of disco divas as compared to female singer-songwriters of the early seventies.<sup>18</sup>

While disco remains a subject that only a few historians have tackled, musicologists, sociologists and dance scholars have added studious material to the collection of trivia-laden nostalgia and memoir that continues to comprise much of what is published on disco.<sup>19</sup> Building on the studies of social dance that emerged in the mid-1990s, a scholarly literature on dance music and club cultures of the late twentieth century has developed that includes disco within its scope.<sup>20</sup> Sarah Thornton and Kai Fikentscher have produced ethnographic studies of dance cultures through participant

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<sup>18</sup> Schulman, *The Seventies*, 72-75. While I agree with Schulman's argument as a basic understanding of disco and race relations, the racial story behind disco is much more complex than his three-page discussion suggests. Kutulas, "'You Probably Think This Song is About You': 1970s Women's Music from Carol King to the Disco Divas," in *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 172-193. While I respect Kutulas's interpretation of disco as "backlash music" because of how it seemed to narrow the confines of feminism, I see the situation as more complicated, as I address in chapter 5.

<sup>19</sup> Non-academic writings on disco include: Alan Jones and Jussi Kantonen, *Saturday Night Forever: The Story of Disco* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2000); Mel Cheren, *Keep on Dancin': My Life and the Paradise Garage* (New York: 24 Hours for Life Inc., 2000); John-Manuel Androite, *Hot Stuff: A Brief History of Disco* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001); Josiah Howard, *Donna Summer: Her Life and Music* (Cranberry Township, PA: Tiny Ripple Books, 2003); Larry Harris with Curt Gooch and Jeff Suhs, *And Party Every Day: The Inside Story of Casablanca Records* (New York: Backbeat Books, 2009); and Randy Jones and Mark Bego, *Macho Man: The Disco Era and Gay America's Coming Out* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> For more on the development of this scholarship see Julie Malnig, "Introduction," in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Malnig (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

observation that acknowledge 1970s disco as historical precedent.<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson use a cultural studies and critical theory framework to explore dance culture and the discourses (popular and academic) surrounding it and make important claims about disco's potential to confound the gender binary.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, under this new umbrella of dance culture studies, scholars have done significant academic work on disco specifically. Walter Hughes and Mitchell Morris have explored the relation of disco and gay subjectivity; Carolyn Krasnow defended a compelling dissertation on the different aesthetic ideologies in disco and rock; Alice Echols and Gillian Frank have explained the disco backlash; Nadine Hubbs has traced the musical markers of difference in Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive"; Daryl Easlea and Joshua Gamson have extrapolated on the careers and politics of specific disco performers; Tim Lawrence and Peter Shapiro have written monograph-length histories of the era; and the literature and arts journal, *Criticism*, devoted its Winter 2008 issue to the theme.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995) and Fikentscher, *"You Better Work!": Underground Dance Music in New York City* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture, and the Politics of Sound* (New York: Routledge, 1999), esp. 101-104. Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disco Jockey* (New York: Grove Press, 1999) is another of these dance culture studies, although in a less academic tone.

<sup>23</sup> Hughes, "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 147-157; Morris, "It's Raining Men: The Weather Girls, Gay Subjectivity, and the Erotics of Insatiability," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, ed. Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hameshley (Los Angeles: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999), 213-229; Krasnow, "The Development of Aesthetic Ideology in Popular Music: Rock and Disco in the Nineteen Seventies," (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1999); Echols, "'Shaky Ground': Popular Music in the Disco Years," in *Shaky Ground: The '60s and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May 2007): 276-306; Hubbs, "'I Will Survive': Musical Mappings of Queer Social Space in a Disco Anthem," *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (May 2007): 231-244; Easlea, *Everybody Dance: Chic and the Politics of Disco* (London: Helter Skelter, 2004); Gamson, *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005); Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005). *Criticism* 50, no. 1 (Winter 2008), includes the following articles: Charles Kronengold,

All these studies make significant contributions to a generally understudied topic, but, with few exceptions, the main focus is on the meaning disco had for marginalized groups and the articulation of difference, rather than on disco's movements into mass culture or mainstream experiences of disco at the levels of use and identity. The origins of disco in gay and minority communities is a significant part of American cultural history and has been elaborated upon most notably by Tim Lawrence in his work *Love Saves the Day*.<sup>24</sup> Lawrence offers a dynamic narrative of technical achievements, pioneering DJs, and club culture, following closely the careers of key discos and DJs, but his analysis of mainstream disco and its role in American culture is constrained, especially in terms of gender, by a source base that relies heavily on interviews with male DJs who were pioneers in crafting disco as a subculture as well as his own implicit bias against mainstream disco, which many scholars seem to share. Scholars choose to prioritize the disco subculture because of its supposed superiority as art form and subversive activity and dismiss its mainstream form as overly commercial and therefore insignificant, which has left mainstream disco under analyzed.<sup>25</sup> While I accept the

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"Exchange Theories in Disco, New Wave, and Album-Oriented Rock"; Alice Echols, "The Land of Somewhere Else: Refiguring James Brown in Seventies Disco"; Tan Lin, "Disco as Operating System, Part One"; and Tavia Nyong'o, "I Feel Love: Disco and its Discontents." Also see Carolyn Krasnow, "Fear and Loathing in the 70s: Race, Sexuality, and Disco," *Stanford Humanities Review* (1993): 37-45; Jaap Kooijman, "Turn the Beat Around: Richard Dyer's 'In Defense of Disco' Revisited," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (May 2005): 257-267; and Tim Lawrence, "Beyond the Hustle: 1970s Social Dancing, Discotheque Culture, and the Emergence of the Contemporary Club Dancer," in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 199-214.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*. Also see Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, esp. chapters 1-3, and Fikentscher, *You Better Work*, 11-29.

<sup>25</sup> A clear example of this disdain for mainstream disco can be found in Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, in which they claim, "Before commercial success twisted the music into a polyester perversion of itself, and wrenched the scene out of New York's gay underground only to drop it into the funkless lap of mainstream America, disco was the hottest, sexiest, most redeeming and most deeply loving dance music there has been" (126). Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, gives due recognition to the dominance of disco in American culture but also qualifies its significance with statements like the

relative validity of this stance and do not necessarily seek to defend the aesthetic value of mainstream disco, I do believe it necessary to move beyond aesthetic judgments and explore the full complexity of gender representation within the disco mainstream.<sup>26</sup>

The underground subculture of its early years was not how most Americans experienced and understood disco, yet even those scholars who make the products of mainstream disco their central subject often do so only to explore their meanings for gay men or to explain the disco backlash. I choose, instead, to emphasize the broad popularity of disco as representative of larger social and cultural trends of the era.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, many studies of disco lack substantial historical context and analysis of gender and heterosexuality; most tend to deal with these issues in a perfunctory manner, if at all, and a comprehensive study of gender and sexuality within disco culture has yet to be undertaken. The work of Krasnow, Echols, and Kutulus are key exceptions, offering explicit discussion of heterosexual issues of gender and sexuality in relation to disco, but until the recent publication of a new book by Alice Echols, their work was limited to single chapters or essays. My dissertation builds on and complicates this work by exploring the spectrum of gender and sexual representations that mainstream disco offered both men and women and how that spectrum was indicative of tensions within the larger historical context. To elaborate on this significance, I draw on scholars who have

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following: “Disco had become artificial, stylized, disengaged and apolitical, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content” (133).

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence Levine, in his classic article, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (December 1992): 1369-1399, points out that an inability to move beyond aesthetics and appreciate the “substantive complexity” of popular cultural artifacts is one of the main reasons why scholars do not always respect the study of popular culture in the same way they do folklore or other, more traditional, historical sources.

<sup>27</sup> I have made mainstream disco my subject of study because I agree with the claims of historians like Warren Susman that everyday forms of consumption help us to understand how people experienced the world. Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), especially see page 103 where he states, “Mickey Mouse may in fact be more important to an understanding of the 1930s than Franklin Roosevelt.”

argued that music does important ideological work in the construction of sexuality and gender and that these constructions are historically contingent.<sup>28</sup> In this dissertation, those constructions are contingent on the lingering influence of an era of social movements.

Alice Echols's new book, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, published during this dissertation's final stage of revision, is a significant exception to the scholarship critiques I enumerate above.<sup>29</sup> Echols, like myself, takes issue with those scholars who reinforce a declension narrative of disco as subculturally pure and transgressive only to become inconsequential in its mainstream, commercial form. Moreover, she provides cogent and sustained analysis of mainstream disco's influence on gender and sexual conventions for various groups in an era shaped by sexual revolution, gay liberation and feminism. As such, our arguments, ideas, and content overlap considerably in certain parts. I have cited her appropriately in the few incidences where I drew a new and unique idea or fact from her narrative that added to my own; otherwise, I take our correlating interpretations as evidence of similar sources leading to comparable conclusions and, ultimately, as substantiation of mainstream disco's cultural significance in larger American history.

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<sup>28</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*; Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, eds, *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music*; Angela McRobbie with Simon Frith, "Rock and Sexuality" in McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Routledge, 2000); Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Lori Burns and Melissa Lafrance, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).



## Key Words and Concepts

It would perhaps be helpful to pause here and explain my conceptualization of “mainstream disco.” I understand mainstream in my studied era to mean that which appealed to and was consumed by something of a vast middle, trends taken up by multiple interest groups (across race, class, age, sexual preference, etc.) and circulated through standard commercial channels. By definition, the mainstream included the dominant groups of white and middle class, but it did not necessarily exclude minority groups such as blacks or gays. However, a cultural form that appealed to a subordinated group only was generally not mainstream. Certainly, disco appealed most strongly to a cohort of single youths and young adults, from teens to thirty-somethings, who were most directly engaged in the renegotiation of gender roles and relations in response to sexual revolution and liberation impulses. “The mainstream” to which I reference throughout consists mostly of this cohort. Yet, it should be noted that while many older adults, along with more conservative Americans of all ages, probably had little interest in the new “craze,” disco was expansive enough and its meanings malleable enough to appeal to a variety of ages and political and cultural persuasions, especially after the success of *Saturday Night Fever*. Indeed, a strong strand of the backlash that developed against disco was about it being too “plastic” and appealing to too vast an audience to be considered “hip,” “trendy,” or meaningful.

Disco achieved mainstream status when the music of gay underground clubs and black dance culture began infiltrating the radio and *Billboard* Hot 100 and entrepreneurs began marketing the corresponding leisure activity to a more inclusive audience by opening discos in towns and cities across the country. The actual entry of disco into the

mainstream is debatable, but *Billboard* celebrated its two-year anniversary in July 1976, stating, “Two years ago this month, the Hues Corporation’s ‘Rock The Boat’ and George McCrae’s ‘Rock Your Baby’ were back-to-back No. 1 singles in *Billboard*, dramatically signaling the start of the disco boom and opening the floodgates for no fewer than four dozen disco tunes that have since become top ten hits.”<sup>30</sup> In my conceptualization, disco reached a mainstream audience by 1975, and became a mass cultural phenomenon when *Saturday Night Fever* catapulted it into new realms of ubiquity.<sup>31</sup>

Correspondingly, I understand disco to be “popular culture” in multiple, if contentious, senses informed by the debates in cultural studies scholarship. Abiding by the definition propounded by Lawrence Levine, disco was popular because it was widely disseminated, widely accessible, widely consumed and enjoyed.<sup>32</sup> Yet, disco also speaks to the more complicated deconstruction of “the popular” put forth by Stuart Hall. With its origins in gay underground clubs and black dance culture, disco represented the expressive culture of oppressed groups, which is where Hall has located the meaning of

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Grein, “Disco Contributions Impressive,” *Billboard*, 25 July 1976.

<sup>31</sup> “Mass culture” is a notoriously troublesome and debated label in cultural history. Taking a cue from James Cook’s claim that “qualitative labels such as ‘popular’ and ‘mass’ inevitably refer to modes of production that are historically mobile and often vary from medium to medium,” I use the label “mass” to emphasize the rapid and expansive growth of disco after the release of *Saturday Night Fever* (SNF). Disco was certainly mass culture before SNF in the sense that it was widely available through news articles, the distribution of records, and nationwide opening of clubs. But the expanse of disco’s availability and visibility grew substantially post-SNF. I use the labels “mainstream” and “mass” to delineate the relative ubiquity of disco in each phase (pre-SNF v. post-SNF, noting that disco remained mainstream in its mass form). I could perhaps have labeled the post-SNF era “massively popular culture” and do at times refer to it more specifically as “mass-marketed culture,” but found mass culture to be the least cumbersome label. I elaborate on the process of disco’s “mainstreaming” in my first chapter. For discussions of labels see James W. Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present and Future*, ed. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O’Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), esp. 295 and Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), esp. chp. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Levine, “Folklore of Industrial Society,” 1373. While Levine’s article gives meaning to consumer choices, especially in pointing out that not all mass culture is popular, other scholars have criticized it as too far to the extreme of “autonomy” for the consumer. See T.J. Jackson Lears, “Making Fun of Popular Culture,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (December 1992), 1417-1426.

the “popular classes.” But, as Hall also makes clear, even in this underground form disco could never completely disassociate itself from the commercial modes of production that defined consumer culture in the twentieth century. As such, and especially as it became increasingly incorporated into the dominant culture industry, disco existed as part of the “dialectic of cultural struggle” that Hall delineates and was popular in that it represented the constant tensions between producers and consumers to dictate what becomes popular culture. The culture industry, through its technologies of production, distribution, and standardization, determines the cultural products available, but the inherent tension between the dominant producers and their audiences means that there exists the possibility for popular consumers to suppress and resist their domination through the creation of individual meanings in the consumption of cultural products.<sup>33</sup>

Scholarly studies of various cultural forms offer insight into Hall’s dialectic and grapple with questions of consumer agency and meaning making within the complications of a commercial culture industry—showing how consumers actively choose what mass culture they wish to consume; how different groups appropriate the same cultural products but inflect them with multiple, contradictory meanings; and how these meanings do not necessarily correlate with, often actively resist, those intended by the culture industry.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, scholars have argued that in the cultural products of

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<sup>33</sup> For more on this conception of “the popular” see Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’” (1981), in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. John Storey (London: Prentice Hall, 1998), 442-453. Cook, “Return of the Culture Industry,” discusses the recent resurgence and usefulness of the culture industry concept first articulated by Theodor W. Adorno in the 1940s. See Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> For a few key examples of studies that argue for and demonstrate an active role in meaning-making on the part of consumers, see Levine, “Folklore of Industrial Society”; Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987); Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*; Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty*

performance, performers themselves can create their own meanings that do not necessarily correlate with the intentions of production managers, songwriters, record producers, or consumers.<sup>35</sup> Disco divas, for example, could take performances and images otherwise intended or interpreted as disempowering sexual objectification and make them subversive by endowing them with their own meanings of sexual agency and empowerment. Ultimately, exploring the potential for various participants to find their own pleasure and often-contradictory meanings in disco's myriad representations helps explain both the enormous popularity of and eventual backlash against it.

Equally important in understanding mainstream disco is to note that disco encompassed more than just a recognizable musical genre; it existed as a culture made up of clubs, music, fashion, movies, television shows, and related products.<sup>36</sup> As such, I use the terms "club" and "disco" (or discotheque) interchangeably to reference the spaces

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*Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), esp. chp. 6; and Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). For further discussion of cultural "appropriation" see Roger Chartier, "Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France," in *Understanding Popular Culture*, ed. Steven L. Kaplan (New York: Mouton, 1984) and Roger Chartier, "Texts, Printing, Readings," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 154-175. Also see Kelley, *Race Rebels* and Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979, repr., New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> See Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). Also see Marybeth Hamilton, *When I'm Bad, I'm Better: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. Davis most expressly argues that the performance itself can produce a meaning in contention with that intended by the production process with her discussion of Billie Holiday who, as a singer, was able to interpret songs and inject her own personal meaning into highly commercialized and mass-produced songs composed for her by white men.

<sup>36</sup> While disco culture seems to correlate well with Dick Hebdige's delineation of subculture and style (especially the moment of incorporation he discusses on pp. 92-100), I choose not to define it as such. While I do not deny, in fact try to highlight, the potential for resistance within mainstream disco, I do not see resistance as its *raison d'être* (although I would argue that meaning for underground and gay disco). Instead, I see disco culture as a negotiation of the gender and sexual tensions of a society coming to terms with the cultures of resistance of the previous era. As such, I see disco culture less as subculture and more along the lines of David Stowe's argument for "swing culture" as a microcosm of American society. See Hebdige, *Subculture* and David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). Rose, *Black Noise* was also helpful in understanding disco as a culture.

where dancing took place, but I also use “disco” or “disco scene” (“disco culture,” “disco style”) to refer more generally to the culture and industry as a whole.<sup>37</sup> *Billboard* presented “disco” as the products and industry surrounding the leisure activity of dancing to recorded music in a public space, and I often abide by this same definition, which means that ultimately, the music played in discos was of every possible genre—a club’s DJ did not have to play only disco music for the venue to be called a discotheque. When I refer to “disco music” or the “disco sound” I am trying to get at those songs produced by artists readily identifiable with the disco craze and commonly categorized within the genre, but disco music was a curious mixture of many musical genres. The only requirements seemed to be that a song be danceable in a way that engaged the whole body. Most disco songs had a driving 4/4 beat and a tempo around 120-beats-per-minute, but more importantly, disco music was about dense layering of a wide variety of instruments and sounds.<sup>38</sup> The lush and smooth orchestral arrangements of 1970s “sweet soul” made up much of the earliest disco hits, such as Barry White’s “Love’s Theme” and Van McCoy’s “The Hustle.” But the funky stylings of groups like K.C. and the Sunshine Band, Brass Construction, and T-Connection also scaled the disco and pop charts, as did many Eurodisco hits—highly stylized interpretations of soul music, replicated mechanically through automated drum machines and other synthesized sounds by acts like Donna Summer, ABBA, and Silver Convention. In 1978, when the disco genre seemed most solidly defined, the *Chicago Tribune* revealed its inherent refusal of

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<sup>37</sup> In his book, *This Business of Disco*, Radcliffe Joe includes chapters on such topics as producers; record labels; disco radio; Hollywood, Broadway, and television; print music; roller disco; dance schools; sound, lighting, and design; and disco accessories.

<sup>38</sup> Disco’s emphasis on texture and layering is best explained by Krasnow, “Aesthetic Ideology in Popular Music,” chp. 3. Also see Kronengold, “Exchange Theories.” For further discussion of the variety within disco music, see Echols, “Shaky Ground,” 180.

classification with the headline: “59,000 *rock* to ‘*disco* beat’ at Soldier Field *Funk-Fest* [emphasis added].”<sup>39</sup> The beat for what came to be called “formula disco” was pounding and ubiquitous, yet after becoming familiar with the variety of disco music and songs that hit the top of the *Billboard* Disco and Hot 100 charts, it becomes nearly impossible to believe the criticism that disco music is boring because it all sounds the same.

Many in the music industry and those fans devoted to a “pure” soul sound or rock canon also criticized disco for being “inauthentic”—an inferior form of rock because of its emphasis on synthesized sound and de-emphasis of authorship, a compromised form of black expression because of how its lush, polished layers and commercial appeal to whites contradicted the habitual assertion that “authentic” black music is about raw grit and anguish. The persistence of such criticism has meant disco’s absence, dismissal or derision in many studies of American popular music.<sup>40</sup> Even Brian Ward, who otherwise takes issue with those who read sweeter soul sounds as mere capitulation to white demands, interprets disco as a “banal and vacuous caricature” of older black music.<sup>41</sup> By exploring the contemporaneous debates surrounding disco’s “authenticity” and impact as crossover, and acknowledging its popularity with and significance for blacks as well as whites, I stand with those scholars who question racialized claims to authenticity and

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<sup>39</sup> “59,000 Rock to ‘Disco Beat’ at Soldier Field Funk-Fest,” *Chicago Tribune*, 27 August 1978.

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (New York: Times Books, 1984); Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Martha Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Arthur Kempton, *Boogaloo: The Quintessence of American Popular Music* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 426.

affirm the inherent multiculturalism of popular music and the diversity of musical talent and preferences of all groups within the American population.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, I should note that I understand gender in terms of the ways society constructs ideals of “masculinity” and “femininity”—assigns value to items, behaviors, ideas as either “masculine” or “feminine”—and sexuality as an important subset of this construction, of how one understands and performs masculinity and/or femininity.<sup>43</sup> I employ a broad definition of sexuality that goes beyond behaviors such as sexual intercourse or categories of sexual orientation to include the complete realm of sexual identity as expressed through activity, desire, and attraction, and I use this definition to grapple with how people in the 1970s understood sexuality as part of their identity as women and men and used it as a tool of liberation and gender redefinition.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, gender and sexuality are inextricably intertwined, and by understanding constructions of sexuality, we can better understand corresponding constructions of gender. Moreover, at a time when concepts of feminism and sexual freedom intermingled in a mass media inundated with notions of human potential and an increasingly sexualized culture, sexual

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<sup>42</sup> Steve Perry, “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough: The Politics of Crossover,” in *Facing the Music*, Simon Frith, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 51-87; Stuart Hall, “What is ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 21-37; Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown & the Cultural Politics of Detroit*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); McClary, *Conventional Wisdom*; Marybeth Hamilton, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” *Past and Present*, No. 169 (November 2000): 132-160; Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 2001); Ronald Radano, *Lying Up A Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007) and Echols, “Land of Somewhere Else.” George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1994) and Kun, *Audiotopia* encourage readers to understand popular music as multicultural and the result of complicated inter-cultural collaborations that can be both unifying and divisive.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Butler is foundational in the performance theory of gender identity. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990, repr. New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>44</sup> My understanding of sexuality is, in part, borrowed from Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 233: “Sexuality refers to the expression of sexual identity, through sexual activity, or the projection of sexual desire and attraction.”

liberation for women and women's liberation more generally were mutually constitutive categories, if contentious ones. We must take the time to understand how these concepts informed one another, thus influencing the gender identity, sexuality, and feminism of millions of American women as well as the corresponding responses of many American men. By using a broad definition of sexuality to explore these intersections, I add new dimension to a historiography of feminism that tends to relegate sexuality to such topics as abortion, reproductive rights, women's health, sexual violence, and pornography debates.<sup>45</sup> I also enhance a scholarship of masculinity that has largely ignored disco as a significant cultural marker of conflicted and changing masculine mores in response to the demands of women's liberation.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) remains the only monograph-length attempt to understand the dynamic between this broad definition of sexuality and second-wave feminism, but hers is largely an intellectual history. My work uses popular culture as an avenue into understandings of feminism and sexuality in the mainstream. In doing so, I do not mean to conflate feminism with sexual liberation (a common criticism feminists placed on the media), but merely to acknowledge the significance of sexuality as one issue among many that feminists critiqued and transformed—to support work like Gerhard's that seeks to discount the frequent claim that second-wave feminism was “anti-sex.” Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere* makes an invaluable contribution to this more inclusive reading of feminism and sexuality, cogently arguing that while many feminists frequently and negatively contrast the individual, consumer-oriented, highly sexualized feminism of *Cosmopolitan* to that of the more political, collective action feminism of *Ms.*, the second wave actually included both approaches to women's liberation. My privileging of sexuality over issues such as equal pay, childcare, or women's health is a reflection of disco's tendency to separate itself from such concerns and valorize escape, fantasy, and the body. But it is also an acknowledgement that sexual liberation and feminism are entangled because of how women take agency and power from being sexually free and are potentially criticized for it in the same way they are for more “conventional” feminist actions—that sexual liberation could be liberating and empowering in ways above and beyond sexuality. Indeed, a similar case could be made for men who incorporate feminist ideas into their gender and sexual identities.

<sup>46</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, for example, offers a cultural history of manhood from the early nineteenth century through the present, analyzing a range of material, but does not mention disco or *Saturday Night Fever*. See Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Many studies of masculine representations explore the “remasculinization” or continued subversion of “traditional” masculinity in the 1980s and 1990s. See, for example, Doug Robinson, *No Less a Man: Masculist Art in a Feminist Age* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994); Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); and Russell West and Frank Lay, eds., *Subverting Masculinity: Hegemonic and Alternative Versions of Masculinity in Contemporary Culture* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000). Yet, only a single extended study specifically explores the genesis of these representations



## A National Disco “Conversation,” Or, How I Understand My Sources

A cultural form that traced its roots to the gay and minority populations of New York City, disco ultimately became a national pastime that engaged a variety of key groups, each of which received and understood disco and its success in unique, if overlapping, ways. The source base for this dissertation means to take account of that variety by incorporating a range of voices, most readily represented through the periodical texts consulted. While much of my study specifically analyzes the textual, visual, and aural iconography that made up the disco industry and its related products—instructional guidebooks, movies, music and performers—I have also drawn extensively from newspapers and magazines that reported on disco to varying extents and for different audiences. In many ways, we must analyze the articles in these sources as mediated representations rather than individual commentaries on disco as a cultural form, but those continuities that exist across representations can tell us something about the ways in which disco developed as a phenomenon. Through their circulation and attempts to speak to and on behalf of certain demographic groups, these texts constitute the building blocks of self-organized publics of discourse, and as such, illustrate larger characteristics of the worlds in which they seek to circulate.<sup>47</sup> Importantly, the ways in

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in the confused masculinity of the 1970s. As an exploration of the origins of the “men as victims” paradigm, it spends most of its time on the post-1970s era, highlighting the backlash against progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, like Kimmel, this cultural study fails to incorporate disco. See David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). For studies of the varied responses of men to feminism, see Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) and Amanda Goldrick-Jones, *Men Who Believe in Feminism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

<sup>47</sup> Michael Warner distinguishes this kind of “a public,” which exists through the circulation of texts and acts as a space of discourse organized by and around discourse, from “the public” meant to represent a kind of “social totality” or “the people” and “a public” that is a concrete body or audience in visible space. He also speaks of “counterpublics,” which share the characteristics of publics but do so from an awareness of subordinate status and mark themselves as oppositional to dominant culture and the publics that constitute

which these different periodicals represented disco to their respective publics can tell us something about the meanings different groups gave to the cultural craze and help give a sense of audience reception, especially as disco became increasingly popular among the general mainstream.

The music industry trade papers most thoroughly documented the growth of disco as recording trend and entertainment activity, suggesting how those who represented commercial music understood disco's development. *Billboard*, the oldest and most influential of the major twentieth century trade magazines, launched its "Disco Action" column and chart in October 1974, as a weekly update on the music of the disco scene. In June 1975, it separated disco reports out of "General News" and into a new department called "Discos," in which it reported on developments in the business including openings of discos across the nation, the boom in related hardware and technology industries, the creation of DJ record pools, and *Billboard's* annual (sometimes biannual) Disco Forum, which first convened in January 1976. In its May 1975 "Discomania" spotlight section, *Billboard* briefly highlighted gay dancers and disco's origins in soul music, but the minority elements were overshadowed by emphasis on a more generic "stimulating" sound and articles on the disco hardware boom, growth of mobile discos, and involvement of record labels.<sup>48</sup> In general, *Billboard* presented disco as a moneymaking development for the various parts of the music industry, pushed to the forefront by the involvement of the American mainstream. *Record World* kept pace with *Billboard* by debuting its "Disco File" column and Disco Top 40 in November 1974, and focused its

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it. Multiple and overlapping publics and counterpublics populate this dissertation. See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

<sup>48</sup> "A Billboard Spotlight on Discomania," *Billboard*, May 1975.

coverage almost exclusively on disco as a musical form, rather than a leisure activity, profiling artists and the effects disco music had on the recording industry. *Record World* did not highlight any kind of disco explosion until the summer of 1979, and placed its heritage as “black, Latin and R&B with a touch of rock and roll,” making it clear that other musical genres were perhaps overshadowed by disco but not inactive.<sup>49</sup>

In its “Discomania” lead article, *Billboard* readily acknowledged that “a great deal of the credit for [disco’s] ‘arrival’ belongs to discotheque DJs.”<sup>50</sup> And as disco grew into a substantial industry, DJs created their own trade press to add their voices to the mix. The most significant of these periodicals were *Melting Pot*, the original publication of the National Association of Discotheque Disc Jockeys (NADD), and its offshoot, *Discotheekin*.<sup>51</sup> These publications served as a communication network within the disco industry, reporting the latest in trends, news, and musical action. The general consensus among DJs was that by the opening of 1976, disco had become a fast growing entertainment form well accepted by the mainstream but that the involvement of the larger music industry had significantly altered the essence of disco. The music industry’s interests in promoting specific artists and a certain kind of music eclipsed the art of disco as DJs understood it—the joy of dance in a continuous party dictated by the mixing of the

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Morgan, “Disco Explodes in ’78-’79 (but don’t forget Rock ‘n’ Roll),” *Record World*, 21 July 1979, 12. The weekly entertainment trade magazine, *Variety*, also reported on disco’s development and impact beginning in October 1974. The frequency of its disco coverage increased over the 1970s, mostly in the form of concert reviews and short articles about disco’s influence on other entertainment industries.

<sup>50</sup> Jim Melanson, “Discomania,” *Billboard*, 17 May 1975, D-3.

<sup>51</sup> *Melting Pot* began in August 1974. I was unable to find any archived issues of this publication. In January 1976, Alex Kabbaz broke from *Melting Pot* and started his own magazine, *Discotheekin*, of which I was able to read issues from January through September of 1976 at the Library of Congress. Also see Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 205-206. The publication of the Southern California Disco D.J.’s Association was entitled simply *Disco*. I was able to view Volume 2, Numbers 5, 14-16 (March, August 1979) at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles. I also viewed a single edition of *Discotheque Magazine* (July 1979), the publication of the Los Angeles Disc Jockey Association, at the Library of Congress.

DJ.<sup>52</sup> The glut of material that entered the disco market as record labels recognized its profit potential exacerbated what DJs viewed as the demise of their art form.

The typical disco DJ, as described by Vince Aletti, disco writer for *Record World*, was most often male and gay, whether by sexual preference or “sensibility,” as were many of the most devoted disco dancers.<sup>53</sup> To get a sense of these key voices in the disco conversation I consulted a number of gay-oriented periodicals, including *The Advocate*, *Village Voice*, *After Dark*, and *Chicago Gay Life*.<sup>54</sup> A male vantage point clearly dominated these publications. At best, they spoke of an urban gay scene in which men and women tended to patronize separate bars (some practiced discriminating door policies), spurred on by a general animosity between genders.<sup>55</sup> For many lesbians, connected to a women’s movement that defined objectification as oppression and sought liberation from the exploitative power of sex, the definition of sexual freedom and the imperatives of sexual revolution were enlightening and empowering, but complicated. Lesbian-feminists took the atmosphere of revolution and liberation as an opportunity to expand the bounds of sexual pleasure for women at the same time that they fought exploitation, but the tendency to denounce objectification tended to make lesbian

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<sup>52</sup> See especially Alex Kabbaz, “Viewpoint: The Rape of an Industry – Part I,” *Discothekin*, March 1976 and Luis H. Moret, “Where Do We Go from Here?” *Discothekin*, March 1976.

<sup>53</sup> “Broadly speaking, the typical New York discotheque DJ is young (between 18 and 30), Italian, and gay. The prime variable is ‘Italian,’ because there are a large number of black and Latin DJs; ‘gay’ is less variable, but here it’s more a description of sensibility than sexual preference.” Vince Aletti, “SoHo vs. Disco: The Story of ‘The Loft,’” *Village Voice*, 16 June 1975. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) discusses a similar kind of fluid sexual identity and homosexual “sensibility” in an earlier era.

<sup>54</sup> While *The Advocate* and *Chicago Gay Life* were established as periodicals expressly devoted to a homosexual audience, *Village Voice* and *After Dark* were less explicitly so. *After Dark* billed itself as a monthly entertainment magazine but included substantial gay advertising and regularly covered topics of interest to a gay audience. *Village Voice*, an alternative news weekly with an initial coverage area of Greenwich Village when founded in 1955, had a contentious relationship with homosexuality in its early years. By the 1970s, its coverage area had expanded to other parts of New York City, and it had developed a close relationship with gay writers and viewpoints.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Valerie A. Bouchard, “Associate Editor Speaks Out,” *Chicago Gay Life*, 20 June 1975.

expressions of sexual freedom less publicly visible than those of gay men. Indeed, the open and objectifying sexuality that came to dominate gay male culture made many lesbians uncomfortable and fostered gender division within the gay community, both politically and at large.<sup>56</sup> Working-class and butch-femme lesbians challenged the lesbian-feminist tendency to valorize intimacy and androgyny above eroticized gender differences and distinct sexual roles, and a variety of lesbians participated in a highly sexualized disco culture in their own bars, urban mixed discos, and the gender- and sex-integrated clubs of smaller cities.<sup>57</sup> But the male-dominant and metro-centric orientations of these gay periodicals, and of gay disco generally, made finding lesbians difficult in a study focused on the meta-level representation of the disco phenomenon.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> For more information on lesbianism in the women's liberation movement see Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 190-191; Margaret Cruikshank, "Lesbian Feminism," in *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) and Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000). For more on gender division within gay liberation and the gay community see David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006); D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 92-94, 104; and Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 22.

<sup>57</sup> For more on lesbian-feminist, butch/femme controversies see, especially, Joan Nestle, ed. *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992). Nadine Hubbs has rightfully insisted that in smaller cities, gay men and lesbians danced and socialized in the same bars and discos, and Alice Echols has acknowledged the participation of lesbian and bisexual women in disco culture. Unfortunately, no scholar has given extended attention to the place and experience of these women in disco, and there remains much room for research into this topic, especially through oral histories. See Nadine Hubbs, "'I Will Survive': Musical Mappings of Queer Social Space in a Disco Anthem," *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 232; and Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 49, 69-70, 103, 260, 266.

<sup>58</sup> This difficulty has also influenced some of my terminology. My focus on a mainstream in which gay men and lesbians were marginalized means that most of this dissertation's discussion is in reference to heterosexual men and women. In certain cases, I have made distinctions between gay and straight men in disco culture because the sources made that possible and in order to explore the participation of straight men who also made up the largest ranks of the "disco sucks" movement. Because of the difficulty I had finding lesbians in my sources, I often refrain from trying to distinguish women's encounters with disco by sexual orientation. When I refer to "women" in the text I am most readily referring to straight women. But the knowledge that both lesbians and straight women participated in disco culture and that both groups grappled with sexual revolution and feminism within a dominant American commercial culture that often tries to generalize standards of femininity suggests that much of what I assert should (and did) apply to at least some lesbians as well, perhaps to women as a whole. The same, of course, can be said for men.

Male-orientation aside, the writers in the gay press clearly articulated meanings attached to disco they believed were different from those expressed by other groups. Most gay disco participants insisted on their central contribution to the pastime, saying by 1975, “the masses have turned on to what’s been getting us off for the last four years.”<sup>59</sup> And the sexual reference, “getting off,” was not coincidental. For many gay men, disco dancing represented “a kind of joyous, out-of-your-head ecstasy, often explicitly sexual.”<sup>60</sup> That ecstasy came from an understanding of disco dancing as supportive community building, an uninhibited way to decompress, and relief from the pressures and harassment of a heterodominant society—as escape but not mindless escapism. Some homosexual voices defected from this view, but most agreed that disco benefitted the homosexual community (some claimed it as a success for the gay movement<sup>61</sup>) and believed it to be more meaningful to themselves than to those who would take on its conventions as it went mainstream. As a journalist for *The Advocate* described the situation: “The more attuned realized the form was no form at all, total self-expression. The earnest but oblivious thought it was all about being gay and paraded off to places . . . as gay impersonators. And Middle America finally found what it needed in Travolta—a disco role model—and bought the whole act.”<sup>62</sup> According to such a view, “Middle America” was unable to make its own sense of disco and could only follow a pre-defined model, but as we shall see, disco offered a variety of representations from which mainstream participants drew their own meanings.

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<sup>59</sup> “Discos! Cheap Thrills, Entertainment and Escapism,” *The Advocate*, 13 August 1975, 37.

<sup>60</sup> Vince Aletti, “I Won’t Dance, Don’t Ask Me,” *Village Voice*, 26 April 1976, 158.

<sup>61</sup> Skip Rosenthal, “Disco Is the ‘In’ Thing,” *Chicago Gay Life*, 15 October 1975.

<sup>62</sup> Virginia DeMoss, “Disco: From High Camp to High Tech Gay Got It All Together,” *The Advocate*, 25 January 1979, 28.

Similar to how homosexuals understood their disco experience as separate and distinct from that of the mainstream, blacks used the periodical press to debate what it meant to have their music consumed, enjoyed, and created by whites and a mass audience. Multiple types of periodicals make up my collection of black voices. *Soul*, for example, functioned as something of a trade magazine for soul music and billed itself as “America’s most soulful newsmagazine.” Its content focused on the lives and careers of black performers but also included lengthy articles discussing issues such as sex in music, crossover, interracial relationships, and the disco craze. *Soul* understood disco to be the newest trend in soul music, expanding the success and creative expression of black performers. It also recognized disco as a leisure pastime that black Americans enjoyed “long before they were even called discos” and that facilitated social mingling, cultural transition, and romantic relations.<sup>63</sup> More general interest black magazines, such as *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Sepia*, aimed largely at a black middle class and meant to focus on the achievements of African Americans, also celebrated disco as nothing new to black culture; *Sepia* went so far as to call the trend “a wave of blackness inundating night club life.”<sup>64</sup> In these magazines, disco’s presence was most conspicuous in record reviews and profiles of black performers; the handful of articles that reported on the growth of disco culture explained it in terms of welcome escape from hard times, a chance to meet a possible romantic interest, and significant business ventures for black Americans. Black newspapers, including the *New Pittsburgh Courier* and *New York Amsterdam News*, addressed the African-American communities of major urban locales. They saw the

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<sup>63</sup> Leonard Pitts, Jr., “T.G.I.F.: All God’s Children Got Rhythm,” *Soul*, 24 April 1978, 3. Also see Dwight Russ, “Disco: Environmental Mind Seduction,” *Soul*, 6 June 1977. *Black Stars* was another black entertainment magazine that covered all forms of entertainment, unlike *Soul*’s focus on music.

<sup>64</sup> Mark Ribowsky, “The Big Disco Dancing Boom,” *Sepia*, March 1976, 66.

disco craze as “the whole world . . . turning on to ‘soul music’” and respected the element of escape and financial benefits in disco’s growth, their praises tended to be more qualified, pointing out that blacks could never completely escape their troubles and that disco’s financial benefits were not as total for black performers and club owners as many wanted to believe.<sup>65</sup>

As groups closely connected to disco as it became a phenomenon, the voices of gays, blacks, and industry personnel are necessary to get a full understanding of disco’s multivalent uses and meanings. But as a study predicated on the idea that we can find significant meaning in understanding disco’s popularity in larger society, the mainstream press—that which sought not to address a defined market segment, but purported to speak to the population as a whole—plays a central role in my analysis. Major metropolitan newspapers around the country and newsmagazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time* gave the disco boom ample coverage over the course of its development. According to these articles, disco was big business in a slow economy. A “highly, even scandalously profitable” business venture for club operators, disco also served as a cheap form of entertainment for dancers who flocked to the clubs to escape the problems and monotony of life.<sup>66</sup> For example, in 1976, the *Chicago Tribune* quoted the president of a disco consulting firm saying, “These are bad times . . . And every time the country hurts a little financially, it finds an entertaining way to ease the pain.”<sup>67</sup> Two years later, the newspaper still explained that with the economy struggling and a general loss of faith in

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<sup>65</sup> See especially Kwame Brathwaite & Chris Policano, “A Look at the Disco Craze, Pt. 1,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 February 1976; Kwame Brathwaite, “Disco Craze, Pt. 2: The Promoters,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 14 February 1976; and Nelson George, “The Disco Boom and Blacks,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 January 1978.

<sup>66</sup> “Discomania,” *Forbes*, 1 June 1976.

<sup>67</sup> Monroe Anderson, “Discotheques—The Nightlife Craze that Refuses to Die,” *Chicago Tribune*, 29 February 1976.



American institutions, “many believe[d] the future and problems of the present may be reasons for the disco boom.”<sup>68</sup> Other publications also spoke of disco’s appeal in terms of escape, as a chance for people to break out of their 9-to-5 lives into a world of glamour, sophistication, even fantasy. For the mainstream, disco was a “world of self-stardom,” a participatory exercise in which one dancer claimed, “I can be as free as I want.”<sup>69</sup> Explaining disco as merely “the escape valve of the 1970s” became especially prevalent as it became increasingly commercial.<sup>70</sup>

Most importantly for this dissertation, however, mainstream periodicals maintained that disco’s self-expression was often of a sexual kind, and the profits of the disco business were, in large part, being made by “entrepreneurs who make their livings by cashing in on the mating habits of affluent youth.”<sup>71</sup> In an October 1974 issue of the *Washington Post*, Tom Zito described discos as “sensuous expressions of an emerging culture of the ‘70s.”<sup>72</sup> To Zito, the sensuality was about homosexuals mixing and flirting and “trendy young people—city and suburban—[going out] for a different, less-inhibited kind of evening,” but in 1976, the business and financial news magazine *Forbes* called discos of all types “fun and sex and exercise,” recognizing a very 1970s detail of “sex rampant—and out in the open.”<sup>73</sup> At the height of disco’s popularity, the New York *Daily News* reported that “everything about discotheques is sexy” and the *Los Angeles*

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<sup>68</sup> Mary Ellen Haskett, “Disco Fans Live for Today, Dance the Blues Away,” *Chicago Tribune*, 24 December 1978.

<sup>69</sup> “Hotpots of the Urban Night,” *Time*, 27 June 1977, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915091,00.html> ; dancer quoted in Barbara Baird, “It’s Exciting . . . Sexy in Disco Whirl,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 August 1979.

<sup>70</sup> For example, compare the tone of these two *Newsweek* profiles of the disco boom: Maureen Orth, Betsy Carter, Lisa Whitman, “Get Up and Boogie,” *Newsweek*, 8 November 1976 and Barbara Graustark, Janet Huck, Peggy Clausen, Ronald Henkoff, “Disco Takes Over,” *Newsweek*, 2 April 1979.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew L. Wald, “Night of the Disco,” *Washington Post*, 26 July 1976.

<sup>72</sup> Tom Zito, “Anything’s Cool at the Discos,” *Washington Post*, 17 October 1974.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*; “Discomania,” *Forbes*, 1 June 1976, 47.

*Times* described the disco atmosphere as “highly sexualized.”<sup>74</sup> Discos had become the meeting places of the singles market. Whether they were about sexual promiscuity and progressive sexual expression or asexual posturing and a reinforcement of the standards and rules of 1960s single bars was debatable, but the centrality of sexuality in disco culture was hard to ignore and gave mainstream disco a significance that went beyond its commercialism and profitability.

The mainstream press clearly articulated disco’s rapid growth, which it attributed, in part, to disco’s explicit engagement with sexuality. It also indicated that disco’s popularity was growing among both men and women, but tended to be gender-neutral in its coverage. To find more gender-specific voices I consulted men’s and women’s magazines, but found them only limitedly helpful in explaining disco’s broad popularity. One genre that represented male viewpoints was pornography or “skin magazines,” such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. As bastions of masculinity and masculine sexual privilege in a time when those concepts were under fire, skin magazines suggested that few men liked disco for more than its sexual objectification of women. *Playboy*’s limited attempts to address disco included a nude photo spread of disco divas and a parodic “Guide to Disco Etiquette.”<sup>75</sup> Yet, even in parody, its humorous address of men’s confusions over how to navigate the popular leisure activity, acknowledged their desire to do so. *Esquire*, a men’s lifestyle magazine marketed to affluent, educated young men, included a few articles addressing disco, nearly all written by Albert Goldman, a critic who, while not completely disparaging, understood it mostly as narcissistic exhibitionism. I also

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<sup>74</sup> Hanson, “Tribal Rites—and Fantasies” and Mimi Ginott and Scott Harris, “Singles Scene: Mating Game Played in Discos, Bars,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 September 1979.

<sup>75</sup> “David Steinberg’s Guide to Disco Etiquette,” *Playboy*, January 1979.

included *Rolling Stone* in this category: not a men's magazine, per se, but as a periodical devoted most obviously to rock criticism (it also reported on other music, politics, and popular culture), it served as representative of the white, male voice that dominated rock culture in the 1970s. *Rolling Stone* dutifully covered disco as a musical development, reviewing new releases—even offering praise where it was due—and reporting on the larger disco craze twice. As a magazine for white, male rockers, however, its reviews and analysis tended toward condescension and cynicism, and its readers made their discontent about disco perfectly clear. Yet, disco could not have prospered as such a large-scale industry without the participation of white, heterosexual men, and as the more general mainstream press suggests, men *were* involved. Disco as a music and culture appealed to the general male population even as their most vocal representatives professed to hate it. This dissertation is, in part, an attempt to understand the complex reasons behind their participation.

Women's magazines of the time do little more than men's in helping to explain why disco became such a popular pastime. The women's magazines I consulted—*Cosmopolitan*, *Essence*, *Ms.*, *Redbook*, *Seventeen*, and *Vogue*—did not cover disco to any great extent. Each magazine represents a unique group of women—young and single, African-American, feminist, married, adolescent, and affluent fashion-conscious women, respectively—but the disco coverage in each magazine appeared most often in the form of fashion spreads and profiles of John Travolta. Moreover, a male point of view dominated those articles that addressed disco. For example, *Cosmopolitan* included a lengthy profile of the disco explosion in September 1978, suggesting that it was a topic of interest to the self-supporting, and sexually confident young women to whom the

magazine catered, but a man wrote the article, which prevents us from getting at what the women readers of the magazine might have actually thought of the craze. The same was true for *Seventeen*'s "Discomania" article and the majority of performer profiles and record reviews in *Essence*. Ultimately, women's and men's magazines were most helpful in offering a sense of historical context and how different groups understood and dealt with the gender issues of the era.

For that reason, this dissertation is most strongly a study of representations of gender and sexuality in disco culture that circulated through public discourse in the years of the cultural form's mainstream ascension. By using what evidence I have that explicitly indicates consumer response and relating representations to historical context, I make logical conjectures about how different groups understood and made meaning out of disco. But I do not pursue this question in any great depth at the level of individual subjects and responses. Doing so—moving beyond a focus on discourse and representation at the meta-level of master tropes and dominant images by giving attention to the question of experience and consumption based on various subject positions—would necessitate a different source base. It would also produce a study that further complicates the understanding of disco's malleable and multivalent meanings that I put forth in the following pages.

Disco was an intergenerational, interracial cultural form that appealed to a broad audience across regions, genders, classes, and sexual identities, with each contextual variable contributing to an individual's unique experience of the craze. The white man or woman unfamiliar with social dance steps might have attended disco dance classes in order to feel adequate in the club world, while a black youth might have learned to dance

in regular social interactions with family and friends and felt completely comfortable navigating the discotheque dance floor. The middle-aged, suburban couple who imagined the disco trend as their chance to dance like Ginger Rodgers and Fred Astaire met friends at the local disco franchise for a fun night of exercise or romance and had a very different social experience with the phenomenon than the young singles who worked the disco circuit as an impetus for dating and “making.”<sup>76</sup> Certainly, the middle-class professional on a business trip who wandered down to the discotheque in the lobby of his hotel had a different interaction with the culture than the working-class youth who danced every weekend at his neighborhood club. Several kiddie and teen discotheques opened during the phenomenon’s boom years, but for many pre- and early-adolescent children, the social aspect of clubs did not enter into their experience of the craze, which would have more likely included listening and dancing to disco records in their homes or perhaps a disco dancing unit in gym class. Indeed, working-class parents with young children at home may have loved listening to disco on the radio or purchasing a few records but may never have found the time or money for a night out on the town.

Residents of small towns and rural areas certainly had limited options for discotheque exposure as compared to the hundreds of various discos operating in major metropolitan areas. As such, gay men in New York City may have been exclusive and unabashedly erotic in their disco operations, but fewer options and a relatively less tolerant residency necessitated that gay men and lesbians in less populated areas often

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<sup>76</sup> “Making” is contemporaneous slang used in a variety of disco-related sources. To the best of my ability, I have deciphered it to mean something along the lines of what “hooking up” means to youths today—anything from making out in a dark corner of the club to a one-night stand, most often more closely aligned with the latter. See Randy Deats, *Dancing Disco* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979) for a examples comparing middle-age, “middle-of-the-road” disco experiences with those of teenagers and urban “outrageous” disco denizens.

party in the same establishments and be more subdued in their disco participation.<sup>77</sup> And the avant-garde city dwellers who regularly populated chic, mixed clubs approached the craze differently than those curious patrons seeking a night of adventure in an urban disco setting. Furthermore, the different kinds of music played at these respective venues would make for distinct experiences, and more quantitative analysis can be done to specify the kinds of clubs (interior decoration, atmosphere, etc.) and records being played in various discos across different parts of the country. There is much room for future scholars to explore these more finely-grained, experiential dimensions of the disco era through oral histories, club records, letters, diaries, scrapbooks and other personal artifacts that have yet to be archived, discovered, and interpreted.

### **Dissertation Structure**

I present my analysis of disco's representations of gender and sexuality in seven chapters, which essentially work as two parts. The first three chapters are meant to provide an entrée into "disco" in the broadest sense—as an industry and culture of music, movies, clothes, and dance steps. Chapter one gives an overview of disco's mainstream story by following its development as an industry. Recounting disco's resonance in gay and black clubs and how record industries and entrepreneurs took up the culture to create a phenomenon that was both welcomed and reviled, chapter one argues for an understanding of disco that is more expansive and complex than either the scholarly focus on minorities and difference or the common tendency to read disco through *Saturday Night Fever*. I address the significance and ubiquity of *Saturday Night Fever* in chapter two, which analyzes the representation of gender and sexuality in the iconic film

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<sup>77</sup> For a contemporaneous discussion of gay male disco in less populated areas see Arthur Bell, "Gay American Gothic: Normal in the Heartland?" *Village Voice*, 21 May 1979.

as compared to other fictionalized accounts of disco, especially the Casablanca-Motown film *Thank God It's Friday*, and uses them as a way to set up the conflicted gender and sexual landscape within which disco functioned. Disco films engaged in a balancing act between the tensions of gender redefinition and sexual freedom and more “traditional” social and sexual scripts, but the variety of representations that made up their plotlines and the ambiguity that permeated the films and critics’ responses are indicative of their production in a time when men and women were negotiating new understandings of what it meant to be “men” and “women.” In my third chapter, I conduct extended analysis of the culture and style of mainstream disco by interrogating what people otherwise unfamiliar with the experience and conventions of disco read about the craze through instructional guidebooks, focusing especially on fashion and dance. Because of how instructions on dancing and dressing for disco took advantage of the elements of liberation infiltrating society while simultaneously dictating how to “properly” express liberation, I argue that these tasks acted as expression that came in the form of “structured freedom”—dictated by industry products but retaining elements of agency on the part of the consumer that provided avenues for experimentation with different articulations of gender performance and sexual explicitness.

The final four chapters move from the larger culture of disco to focus on the performers and music that defined the disco movement. The music was the aspect of disco most readily available to the widest spectrum of people, and the success and failure of the music genre marked the beginning and end of disco as a mainstream craze. Furthermore, while often criticized as a producer’s medium and “faceless” art, a handful of disco performers did become full-fledged superstars or put forth outrageous images

that made them highly visible icons of the disco craze. These are the performers I analyze in this part, beginning with the most prominent disco men in chapter four. Using a collection of black and white disco performers, I look at how these men complicated rigid boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality, which dictated their success in a time when the emergent black feminist movement criticized many of the tenets of Black Power dominant in the early 1970s. In doing so, I also show how the black music industry's debates over disco as crossover music were as much about gender and sexual representations and expectations as they were about a standard narrative of cultural appropriation. Chapters five and six do similar work with the disco divas of the era. The first explores the variety of ways in which divas negotiated the new sexual terrain of a liberated era and argues that these women became voices of feminism without identifying explicitly as such. The following chapter uses Donna Summer—perhaps the most recognized and accomplished disco diva—as a concise case study to argue for the complexity of female sexuality depicted in the disco craze and that this complexity was part and parcel of disco's popularity. In my seventh and final chapter, I take us back to disco's origins in the gay underground and explore the ways in which mainstream disco retained a connection to that past. Through case studies of Sylvester and the Village People, I argue that mainstream disco's language of individuality and universality made it malleable enough to appeal to a variety of masculine and sexual sensibilities.

Gay discos celebrated the politics of the gay liberation movement; they embodied a politics of pleasure that reflected the tendencies of gay liberation to objectify and sexualize the male body, to celebrate their freedom to have sex. Mainstream disco, on the same token, reflected the confusion and complexity of an entire society coming to



terms with a gender and sexual order in the process of being redefined. After decades of social order that, for the most part, accepted the sexual double standard and heterosexual norm, the social change movements of the late 1960s brought that all into question. In the 1970s, Americans came to terms with these challenges and changes. Proponents and practitioners of change coexisted with those more hesitant to change and those who resisted change completely; none held the upper hand until the backlash contingent gained strength at the very end of the decade and came to dominate under Reagan. Moreover, the backlash was able to gain strength because of the way the movements themselves were fragmenting by the middle of the 1970s.

This fragmentation, confusion, and complexity shaped the variety that made up the mainstream disco phenomenon. That there were discos catering to nearly every possible audience was less an indication that disco had deteriorated from the somehow more inherent subversion of its original underground form and more an indication that it had grown in a way that allowed it to speak to an entire society in transition. To hold up the network of underground clubs that made up the origins of disco as a standard by which all future incarnations should be measured prevents us from understanding and appreciating what disco's broad popularity can tell us about the whole of American gender and sexual culture in that moment of confusion. This dissertation is based on the assumption that mainstream disco should not necessarily be measured against its gay and minority roots, but should be taken for what it was and granted significance as such. I hold that it is incredibly significant that a single cultural entity could speak to such a wide variety of positions along the spectrum of gender and sexual possibilities, and such import deserves sustained analysis.

## Chapter 1

### **From Minority to Mass: Toward a History of Mainstream Disco**

One evening in the past year, I introduced myself to a new colleague on the University Art Museum's Student Advisory Board. "What part of history do you study?" he asked, as most people do when they learn one is working toward a Ph.D. When I told him I wanted to understand gender and sexuality in the 1970s by analyzing disco, his immediate response was one of excitement, interest, and curiosity. He eagerly informed me that he did not know much about "real" disco, but he loved disco house music, a dance music derivative of the disco sound.<sup>1</sup> He then asked if I would be talking about Studio 54 in my dissertation: "I don't know much about disco, but I have seen that movie—the one about Studio 54. Was disco really like that? Like Studio 54?" Other people also quickly jump to Studio 54 when I tell them I do research on disco. One man spent several minutes telling me how, in the 1970s, he spent time with the club's owner, Steve Rubell, before he asked me anything else about my research. Another student responded to my work with a quizzical look, a chuckle, and a question: "Do you actually *like* disco?" He then genuinely requested that I tell him something he did not already know about disco. In preparation, I asked him what he did know. He stopped to think and eventually responded, "Well, I know about the picture with that guy in the white suit." When I asked him if he had seen *Saturday Night Fever*, he admitted he had not.

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<sup>1</sup> House music developed in Chicago's Warehouse discotheque in the late 1970s and early 1980s. See Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 407-410.

It became clear to me, through several conversations similar to those above, that the picture of disco in the American imaginary is one centered on those two iconic artifacts—Studio 54 and *Saturday Night Fever*—and that such narrow memories of disco have greatly distorted the history and understanding of a vastly complex phenomenon. Most scholars of disco tend to understand its only true and authentic expression to be that of gay men in underground clubs dancing to DJs spinning the sounds of black soul and funk and see it as fundamentally changed by Studio 54 and *Saturday Night Fever*—“twisted to the point of nonrecognition,” in the words of Tim Lawrence.<sup>2</sup> Yet, people looking back on disco today, especially those who did not live through the craze, tend to understand the same cultural occurrence almost completely through those two agents of change. Generations removed from the disco era and knowing almost nothing about it, young people today (like the two undergraduates depicted above) are practically programmed to dislike and disregard disco as little more than nostalgic party music represented by a man in a white suit and the decadent, drug-infested discotheque depicted in the 1998 film, *54*. Moreover, the separation between how scholars understand disco and its image in American memory has flattened out any significance attributable to the mainstream popularity that disco enjoyed in the years before Studio 54 or *Saturday Night Fever*.

To understand how mainstream disco worked and succeeded within the context of the 1970s, we must shift our timeline backward and expand our image of what constituted “disco.” Disco had important roots in gay and minority communities, but its significance did not begin and end in those clubs; neither should it be limited only to the

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Lawrence, “Beyond the Hustle: 1970s Social Dancing, Discotheque Culture, and the Emergence of the Contemporary Club Dancer,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 210.

two most iconic images of disco in the mainstream. Disco was a well-established musical designation and entertainment activity as early as 1974, three years before Studio 54 opened or *Saturday Night Fever* hit movie screens. Those recognizable icons were neither the beginning of disco as mainstream entertainment nor completely unrelated to disco's underground roots. Rather, they provided the images, music, and media fodder that helped expand disco into the ubiquitous cultural form that subsequent generations have learned to humorously disrespect. And while the tendency to discredit or disassociate oneself from mainstream disco is not unfounded—disco was constantly criticized and fought against in its day—it does prevent people from understanding disco's complex history and thus from making informed choices concerning their affinity to the genre.

To understand and respect disco more fully as a mainstream phenomenon, we need to discern how the music business at the time understood, defined, and dealt with it. Thus, my goal in this chapter is to present a narrative of disco's "mainstreaming" by giving an overview of the changes in the industry from its early underground years to its mainstream form, mass market incarnations, and eventual backlash. My narrative maintains that the disco craze of the 1970s was indebted to its resonances with the dance cultures of gay and black Americans, the musical advancements of which touched the commercial centers of dominant society—record labels and entertainment venues—in ways that made disco a lucrative, if somewhat ad-hoc, development in the mainstream, building on the popularity of dancing and dance music but reworking it for a broad base. I thus hope to show how disco's success became something of a paradox for its originating groups—their cultural influence validated but broad acceptance threatening to

extinguish disco's unique meanings and expressions—as well as a bane to the rock establishment, which misunderstood and challenged disco's stab at cultural dominance.

### **Disco's Hidden Roots**

1970s disco is part of a long and dynamic history of social dance in the United States. As a cultural form that creates community by bringing groups of individuals together in response to the physicality, energy, and pleasure of dance, social dance is constantly changing, its popularity ebbing and flowing, and is shaped by and expressive of the social and cultural values of its particular historical context.<sup>3</sup> In the case of 1970s disco, a key historical context includes the ascendance of records as the primary and accepted form of music in commercial dance clubs, a transition spurred on by dance's central place in the minority communities of gay men and African Americans. As cultural sociologist Sarah Thornton has described, records underwent a “gradual enculturation” into public acceptance, and only in the 1970s did records begin “to dominate the ‘prime time’ out-of-home entertainment.”<sup>4</sup> During the dance crazes of earlier generations, recorded music in public venues was considered inferior to a live band. In the 1950s and early 1960s, jukeboxes or unskilled DJs played Top 40 rock ‘n’ roll records for dancing, but the record hops of teenage life most often occurred in non-commercial venues like community recreational centers and high school gymnasiums

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<sup>3</sup> My understanding of social dance comes particularly from Julie Malnig's Introduction to *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake*, 4-6. Malnig discusses at length the overlaps and distinctions between the labels “social,” “vernacular,” and “popular.” I choose to use social dance here (as opposed to popular) because of how disco was related to the traditions of particular communities of dance. Certainly, disco would also become popular dance as its influence spread.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995), 28, 45. Many journalists contemporary to the disco craze and some disco scholars used the importance of recorded music in disco culture to trace the name, which is drawn from the French, *le discothèque*, meaning “record library,” and craze back to European youths secretly dancing to recorded American music against the dictates of Nazi rule and postwar European nightclubs that played music not included in the public broadcasting model. See especially Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 13-19.

(even as they were recreated for a wide audience on television shows like *American Bandstand*), and the discotheques of the early 1960s catered mostly to the famous and chic. By the end the decade, social dance had lost its cachet among white youths as rock 'n' roll became rock, which was more about protest and listening. Dance clubs and parties still existed, but with rock's aesthetic moving increasingly in the direction of "head music," the social dancing upon which the 1970s disco phenomenon would draw had moved to the underground clubs and gathering places of minority groups.<sup>5</sup>

Disco's gay roots were ripe to develop in the early 1970s because of the simultaneous growth of the gay liberation movement. Larger and more militant than the preceding homophile movement, gay liberation drew from other social movements of the 1960s in the ways it organized protests and other political actions to demand change in the lives of gay men and lesbians. More importantly, gay liberation forced homosexuality out in the open and made visible a lifestyle previously hidden and vilified.<sup>6</sup> Participants based this new form of gay and lesbian activism around the concept of "gay is good," fostering pride in and political action around homosexuality as an identity—a positive aspect of oneself as a human being rather than simply a sexual preference or life choice that society deemed evil, sick, or deviant. Moreover, gay liberation grew out of and helped shape the sexual revolution by seeking to demonstrate

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the dance venues of the 1950s and 1960s and the transition to minority venues see Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 45, 53-54, 60-62, 71; Tim Wall, "Rocking Around the Clock: Teenage Dance Fads from 1955 to 1965," in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 186, 196; and Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 20-24.

<sup>6</sup> As George Chauncey has shown, there existed a thriving and visible gay urban culture in the first half of the twentieth century, but this world was pushed underground and out of the public eye beginning in the 1930s with the repeal of Prohibition and increasingly in the post-World War II era with the anti-communist atmosphere of the Cold War. John D'Emilio has shown that a homophile movement developed during that time, but it was small and focused on assimilationist tactics. See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) and John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

how more of the same (i.e., more frequent penetrative sex) did not define the limits of sexual freedom. The combination of sexual revolution with gay liberation was an opportunity for gay men, in particular, to express their sexuality more openly, often in ways that were expressly objectifying of the male body. Many gay men understood sex itself as a means to liberation—the personal became political in the most fundamental sense. Yet, while gay liberation was empowering and brought about significant change, continued discrimination prevented most gay men and women from “coming out” in the first place, limiting the movement’s overall effect.<sup>7</sup>

The visible celebration of sexuality and objectification of the male form, in opposition to the continued homophobia of straight society, helped make dancing an important part of gay culture, especially in the liberation era. Bar culture has a long and important history in the gay community, providing gay men and lesbians with places in which they could meet one another in scenarios that were both public and collective without having to put on the pretenses of heterosexuality necessary in most other aspects of their lives. Not without problems—police raids and other forms of harassment were frequent occurrences—these urban subcultures helped gay men and lesbians develop an identity as homosexual and fostered a group life that created the kind of collective

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the gay liberation movement and its history see David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2004); Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1992); D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 13-20; Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982), 290-294; Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 152-153; Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 175-191.

consciousness necessary to the development of a political movement.<sup>8</sup> With the birth of gay liberation, organizations like the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) used their own dances (an alternative to the Mafia-run gay bars in New York City at the time) as a way to recruit new members, raise funds, and further shatter the isolation of gay life. Offering an affordable admission fee and providing a sense of freedom, these dances brought gay men and lesbians together in public celebration of homosexuality, brought new activists into the gay liberation fold, and made politics fun. As historian Beth Bailey explains about the dances hosted by the Kansas University GLF, “Dances were a key part of ‘making’ gay beautiful.”<sup>9</sup> After the GAA’s successful campaign to change the archaic laws regulating homosexual patronage of New York nightspots, legal gay bars and discos proliferated as part of urban nightlife.<sup>10</sup>

Discos, like the political dances, were popular because of their atmosphere of acceptance and community. And while they increasingly became centers for personal rather than activist politics, they remained the central sites of a politics of pleasure that came to define liberation for many gay men: disco’s “evocation of pleasure was by necessity its politics, and by extension its politics was pleasure.”<sup>11</sup> As David, a twenty-five-year-old businessman and frequent patron of the Ice Palace, explained, “I come to Ice Palace once a week to a place where I know my sexuality is not a problem, where I can meet and dance with other gays. . . . I dance, I escape in a nice setting. I don’t feel

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<sup>8</sup> For more on gay bar culture before the 1970s, see D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, esp. chp. 1. Also see Chauncey, *Gay New York*; and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Melanie Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*, 184. For more on GLF Alternate U dances and GAA Firehouse dances see Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 63-65; Carter, *Stonewall*, 222-225; David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006), 128, 170-171.

<sup>10</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 64.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.



inhibited here.”<sup>12</sup> Discos provided places where gay men (and, less often, lesbians) could gather to celebrate their sexuality without being harassed or ostracized.<sup>13</sup> Previous scholars have articulated how disco dancing was pleasurable in the way the beat forced gay men to surrender their autonomy to the love of a community of dancers and in how the polyrhythmic nature of the music acted as a whole body eroticism that could break down boundaries of identity.<sup>14</sup> Yet, gay disco dancers also practiced the politics of pleasure, in part, through the sexual objectification of the male form: a privilege that a heteronormative society denied them or that at best could be done covertly, was now practiced with abandon. It was a principle that colored the way gay men understood their disco experience. As one contemporary author described 12 West, a popular gay disco in Manhattan: “For gays, the experience is a celebration of gayness. In the summer, especially, this is a celebration of the male body because hardly anybody on the dance floor wears a shirt.”<sup>15</sup> Dancers corroborated the observation in interviews, talking about “so many hot-looking gays dancing together” and commenting on how “everyone looks so good and sexy and happy.” The latter interviewee also stated that he “love[d] being part of this energy.”<sup>16</sup> A sexual energy, to be sure, but also an energy that brought these men together under a common politics of pleasure. The gay disco scene that grew in New York City, and eventually spread across the country, was a way for gay men to act

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Vita Miezitis, *Night Dancin'* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 81.

<sup>13</sup> When harassment did occur, dancing retained an element of outwardly political protest, as in Lansing, MI, where in 1974, the Gay Alliance of Michigan State University protested discrimination by dancing at a bar where such actions were repeatedly condemned. “Dancing Ban Brings Dance-In,” *The Advocate*, 10 April 1974, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Hughes, “In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture* ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 147-157; Richard Dyer, “In Defense of Disco,” originally published 1979, reprinted in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 407-415; Tim Lawrence, “Beyond the Hustle,” 199-214.

<sup>15</sup> Miezitis, *Night Dancin'*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 65 and 75.

out on a broad scale the political ideology of gay liberation by celebrating community and an uninhibited sexuality through dance.

Homosexual men kept disco alive during its years underground and would ultimately shape the style and trends of disco as mainstream entertainment. From weekly parties in David Mancuso's private loft (named The Loft by members); debaucherous "bumping" in a converted Catholic Church called the Sanctuary; and renowned party spots like the Tenth Floor, Ice Palace, and Le Jardin in New York; to celebrated gathering spots across the country including the Bistro in Chicago, Studio One in Los Angeles, Pete's 800 Club in New Orleans, and Joe's Disco in Atlanta—predominantly gay discotheques proliferated in the first half of the 1970s, remained at the vanguard of the disco movement after its aboveground surfacing, and continued to succeed into the 1980s. Indeed, the underground network of gay dance clubs can be traced back as far as the mid-1960s when the gay enclaves of Fire Island began hosting "Tea Dances" as part of their summertime refuge from the disaffection of living within a heterodominant culture. These dances—originally dances to recorded music held in the afternoons as a play on polite society's affair of high tea—became more elaborate and popular over time, and their counterparts in mainland Manhattan and other cities allowed for year-round, cross-country revelry. Moreover, while the gay disco trend prospered in urban locales, it was by no means an exclusively urban phenomenon. Michael Schein of High Bridge, New Jersey, informed readers of *The Advocate* that the gay citizens of Allentown, Pennsylvania, and the surrounding rural area had enjoyed the pleasures of their own Stonewall disco since at least 1972.<sup>17</sup> As disco grew into a mainstream phenomenon in the middle of the decade, common journalistic claims that "disco . . . ha[d] been nursed

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Schein, letter to the editor, *The Advocate*, 8 March 1979, 20.

and nurtured to its current state in the gay community” could be conveniently ignored or creatively repackaged but not denied as truth.<sup>18</sup>

The 1970s disco craze also drew inspiration from a long history of social dance in African American culture, a popular pastime in African American communities for economic and cultural reasons that reached back to the years of slavery. Economically, dancing served as both an affordable entertainment option and a way to help community members in need. To many blacks, disco appeared to be a direct descendent of 1920s Harlem rent parties that continued to help residents raise necessary funds through the 1960s. “Is there anyone out there who doesn’t remember those darkened houses, stacks of ‘45s, raggedy stereos, and 25¢ admission prices that marked ‘60s partying?” young music critic Leonard Pitts, Jr. asked the readers of *Soul*.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the black DJ at Zorine’s, an expensive but diverse membership club in Chicago, refuted the idea that disco got its start exclusively in New York, explaining that dancing to recorded music had long been a part of black Chicago nightlife: “It’s been happening since the ‘40s in black nightclubs—because they couldn’t afford the bands.”<sup>20</sup> Culturally, African Americans danced to maintain a connection to their African heritage, to escape the rigors of hard labor, and to express pleasure within lives often filled with pain and adversity. At

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<sup>18</sup> Virginia DeMoss, “Disco: From High Camp to High Tech Gay Got It All Together,” *The Advocate*, 25 January 1979, 27. For more on the history of gay disco, especially in New York City, see Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around* and Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, both of which tell the story in extensive detail. Also see Mel Cheren, *Keep on Dancin’: My Life and the Paradise Garage* (New York: 24 Hours for Life Inc., 2000); Dusty Miller, “Tea Dancing on Fire Island,” *Discotheekin’*, August 1976; Mark Jacobson, “Hollyw-o-o-d! The Return of the New York Disco,” *New York*, 1 July 1974; and “Discos! Cheap Thrills, Entertainment and Escapism,” *The Advocate*, 13 August 1975.

<sup>19</sup> Leonard Pitts, Jr., “T.G.I.F.: All God’s Children Got Rhythm,” *Soul*, 24 April 1978, 3. Pitts refers to the parties as “quarter parties.” Other black press that relates disco to “rent parties” or “house parties” are Kwame Brathwaite and Chris Policano, “A Look at the Disco Craze, Pt. 1,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 February 1976 and Robert Ford, Jr., “Black Patrons Significant in Club Activities,” *Billboard*, 24 June 1978. For more information on the history and meaning of rent parties see Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 94-117.

<sup>20</sup> Jack Hurst, “Disco!” *Chicago Tribune*, 5 February 1978.

times—such as the swing craze of the 1930s or the teenage dance fads of early rock and roll—the pleasure of dance resonated with both blacks and whites, and cross-racial youth audiences experienced dance as representative of optimism about American democracy and pluralism. As such crazes faded, however, whites tended to move away from dance while blacks maintained the activity as an important element of community-building.<sup>21</sup> As it was for gay men, dancing was a way for blacks to engage in a collective individualism that built community through self-empowerment in spaces where they could come together in a community of acceptance and support.<sup>22</sup> The central role of social dance in black expressive culture kept disco alive even after the dominant culture had abandoned discos for the protest music of the late 1960s. As one black teenager said, “Seems like I been [H]ustling . . . ever since I was a kid . . . People up in Harlem and El Barrio been doing it all their lives.”<sup>23</sup>

The presence of African Americans in clubs across New York City and other parts of the country spurred on the disco boom, in part, as a celebration of the gains of the civil rights movement. Dance venues for blacks through the 1960s had consisted mostly of segregated clubs or makeshift dance floors in spaces meant for other purposes.

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<sup>21</sup> For more on these earlier cross-racial dance crazes see, for example, David Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994); Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Wall, “Rocking Around the Clock”; and Nadine George-Graves, “Just Like Being at the Zoo: Primitivity and Ragtime Dance,” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 55-71.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the history and meaning of social dance in black culture see Tera Hunter, “Dancing and Carousing the Night Away,” in *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) and Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin'*. Hazzard-Gordon has also explored the individual, socio-psychological, cultural and political meanings of dance for Afro-Americans, attributing them to four categories she identifies as identity, cultural integrity, ingroup-outgroup, and political resistance. See Hazzard Gordon, “Afro-American Core Culture Social Dance: An Examination of Four Aspects of Meaning,” *Dance Research Journal* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 21-26.

<sup>23</sup> Ribowsky, “Big Disco Dancing Boom,” 66.

Ballrooms like the Savoy in Harlem catered to an integrated clientele, but most often whites traveled uptown because they could gain admittance to black-owned dance halls and clubs while blacks remained unwelcome in white-owned venues.<sup>24</sup> In 1970s, by comparison, blacks began leaving Harlem to party in downtown Manhattan, and as blacks began celebrating their right to the trendy clubs of white America, the opportunity to partake in a party network previously denied them was a contributing motivator in disco's popularity, even if many discos remained predominantly white or black in clientele. The disco pastime especially began to pick up steam in those clubs populated by black gay men or an integrated gay clientele (i.e. The Loft, which was racially integrated, or Better Days, a predominantly black gay disco opened in 1972).<sup>25</sup> Early black discos, like gay discos, tended to be "fairly relaxed, not overly dressy, and devoted to continuous dancing," and many, like Better Days, remained so.<sup>26</sup> Yet, as the disco craze grew, it turned into business ventures that included black-owned discos deemed "among the most elegant around," and became a kind of lifestyle for many urban blacks who partied, often in integrated clubs, with whites who had made a similar lifestyle for themselves.<sup>27</sup> While gay men danced in discos as a way to find community and acceptance among people like them and tended to prefer separation from straight society,

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<sup>24</sup> Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 48-49; Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin'*, 143-144.

<sup>25</sup> Contemporaneous articles that discuss the movement of blacks out of Harlem to the newly popular, integrated clubs of downtown Manhattan: Jacobson, "Hollyw-o-o-o-d!" 48, 50; Ribowsky, "Big Disco Dancing Boom," 68, 70; Herschel Johnson, "The Discotheque Scene," *Ebony*, February 1977, 56. Cheren, *Keep on Dancin'*, also talks about the influence of black gays on the disco scene (100, 105-106). Information on Better Days: Mieztis, *Night Dancin'*, 83; Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 74-75; Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 92-94, 427.

<sup>26</sup> Jacobson, "Hollyw-o-o-o-d!" 48, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Ford, "Black Patrons Significant," 59; Deborah A. Randolph, "Discos More Than Bars and Dancing," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 25 December 1976; Johnson, "Discotheque Scene"; Ribowsky, "Big Disco Dancing Boom."

blacks inundated the disco craze from early on as a kind of celebration of the fact that they could now be a part of an integrated downtown scene.

Those who had been Hustling all their lives also contributed many of the steps that would make up the disco craze. The myriad variations that developed from the Hustle, disco's main dance step, caused some African Americans to claim "we called the type of dancing that [whites are] doing now jitterbugging then."<sup>28</sup> And African Americans were always ahead of the game when it came to freestyle disco dancing, with television shows like *Soul Train* teaching steps to blacks and whites.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, disco was the latest in a long line of cross-cultural exchange between African-American and Euro-American dance forms that made up American vernacular dance. As described by dance scholars Marshall and Jean Stearns, African dance is performed from a crouched position, exploding outward from the hips to a propulsive rhythm that employs the whole body and puts great emphasis on improvisation and individual steps. European dance, in contrast, tends toward a stiffly erect posture and partnered dances with pre-established patterns.<sup>30</sup> Ever since the Virginia jig of the antebellum Greater Chesapeake blended African and European elements into a dance enjoyed by both black slaves and white elites, these two dance customs have borrowed from each other, creating an American dance tradition littered with steps that straddle the line between "black" and "white."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Flipping, Jr., "'Disco Fever': Are Whites Capitalizing on Black Lifestyles?" *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 28 October 1978, 7. The original Hustle is actually traced to the Latino sections of the Bronx and was often danced to music incorporating a Latin rhythm. For a more detailed history of the origins of the Hustle see Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 184-189.

<sup>29</sup> Knowledge of the "newest of the black dances" coming out of the discos was "not obligatory" (just self-expression), according to Jacobson, "Hollyw-o-o-o-d!" 51.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 15. Also see White and White, *Stylin'*, esp. chp. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Jurretta Jordan Heckscher, "Our National Poetry: The Afro-Chesapeake Inventions of American Dance," in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 19-35.

In the case of disco, while some observers described the Hustle's resurgence of partner dancing (also called touch-dance) as a new incarnation of ballroom dance, disco's focus on the hips was an evident derivative of black and Latin dances rather than Euro-American ballroom steps. Freestyle disco, in particular, drew extensively from African American vernacular dance with its emphasis on the movement of individual body parts, emanating from the hips, in a fluid manner that often suggested sex. In earlier eras, such movements earned the ire of the white middle class who saw them as threatening to their sense of morality as well as black elites who tended to favor European-inspired steps as an attempt at respectability and the "uplift" of the race.<sup>32</sup> By the 1970s, however, the sexual revolution had changed American society to such an extent that this previously objectionable style of dance had become popular with a wide range of people—middle class, working class, black, and white. Those involved noticed that "in this age of disco . . . dancing has finally become respectable," and because "suburban housewives and chic residents are caught up in the dance craze . . . bumping and grinding 'ain't nasty no mo.'"<sup>33</sup> As disco became increasingly popular, the influences of black dance often went unacknowledged and its sexual connotations sometimes toned down, but the bodily movements of African American dance were a central element of the disco craze.

Much of the music played in seventies discos was also indebted to the cultural history of black Americans. The origins of disco music are hard to pinpoint precisely, and what came to be categorized as disco is much more convoluted than the constant criticism of "formula" would suggest, but the innovative sounds and danceable music that disco DJs brought to the party were highly influenced by the soul music of black artists.

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<sup>32</sup> Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 168-186; and Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin'*.

<sup>33</sup> Phylliss Hudson, "Disco: New Name, Same Old Thing," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 25 February 1978, 21.

The list of names included in disco critic Vince Aletti's "basic discotheque library"—commonly believed to be the first published piece on disco—reveal the major role black music played in the origins of the disco trend: War, the O'Jays, Earth, Wind & Fire, the Temptations, Eddie Kendricks, James Brown, and Stevie Wonder.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it was a common journalistic refrain, especially in the early mainstream days, to comment on how black music was the most happening music at the discos.<sup>35</sup> Soul, funk, and R&B (often combined with a Latin rhythm or drums) were the roots of the disco dance boom, and black musicians, producers, songwriters and performers continued to turn out music to meet disco demand throughout the 1970s. But as disco became increasingly popular and the disco sound coalesced around lush, highly orchestrated melodies and an often insistent 4/4 beat that seemed to contradict the syncopated and unpredictable rhythms of an earlier black sound, more musicians jumped on the bandwagon and record companies began producing songs with the dance floor in mind, making disco the dominant pop music of the era and toning down much of its funkier sound. The redefinition and co-optation of soul music that resulted from the mass popularity and marketing of disco would be of special concern to the black music industry in disco's later years.<sup>36</sup>

Centrally concerned with building the energy of their audiences through dance, the DJs of the gay disco network took this black music and developed new techniques in

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<sup>34</sup> Aletti included in his list more obscure tracks and foreign imports by names such as the J.B.'s, Mandrill, Barrabas, The Fatback Band, and Willie Hutch, but these were meant to be "supplemental to the selected works of" those listed above. Vince Aletti, "Discotheque Rock '72: Paaaaarty!" *Rolling Stone*, 13 September 1973.

<sup>35</sup> Jim Melanson, "Labels Eye Discos as Hot Spots to Break R&B Product," *Billboard*, 6 July 1974; Tom Zito, "Top 40 Music: Paint It Black," *Washington Post*, 6 July 1974; Tom Zito, "Anything's Cool at the Discos," *Washington Post*, 17 October 1974; Brathwaite and Policano, "Look at the Disco Craze"; Judy Spiegelman, "Black Music in the '70s: A Crisis Survived," *Soul*, February 1980; Radcliffe A. Joe, *This Business of Disco* (New York: Billboard Books, 1980), 26-27; Cheren *Keep on Dancin'*, 115-116.

<sup>36</sup> For more detailed accounts of the transitions in disco music, see Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day* and Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*. I will also be discussing these issues further below and again in Chapter 4.



mixing and blending that would come to define the disco trend. Francis Grasso, DJ at the Sanctuary, was one of the first DJs to overlap records so the music did not stop. Grasso's techniques of beat mixing and slip-cueing helped create continuous musical experiences that played as a unified "journey," focused on extending the groove.<sup>37</sup> Mancuso also mixed his records, but in a way that built, peaked, and came back down, giving disco a lush elegance.<sup>38</sup> The building of music to a kind of orgasmic peak was a defining aspect of the disco experience first experimented with at Mancuso's Loft. Blending and mixing music also created a longer, more intense, "trancelike" experience that extended the pleasure of the dance in ways that the choppiness of a jukebox could not; it heightened the sense of freedom at GAA dances as well as disco nights.<sup>39</sup> The Gallery DJ, Nicky Siano, was especially important in defining what would become the pop disco sound with his perfection of the smooth mix, fondness for songs with a deep bass and female vocals, and his repeated emphasis on a song's percussive break.<sup>40</sup> The techniques that these underground DJs pioneered became standard as disco exploded into the mainstream. Yet, no matter how flooded the disco market became with record companies producing disco, gay discos remained at the vanguard of new music. It is there that disco "retain[ed] much of its original vitality."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jacobson, "Hollyw-o-o-o-d!" 48, 50; Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 27-29.

<sup>38</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 64. The skills of DJs to blend and mix in a way that brought the audience up and down remained central to descriptions of the disco experience well into its mainstream success. See, for example, Kitty Hanson, *Disco Fever* (New York: New American Library, 1978), chp. 9; Miezitis, *Night Dancin'*, xx; Randy Deats, *Dancing Disco* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979), 40-43; and Clarence Page, "Disco Grows as Rock Fans Cry 'Enough'," *Chicago Tribune*, 12 July 1979.

<sup>40</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 38-39.

<sup>41</sup> Frank Reardon, "Gay Strength: New York Club Patrons Loyal; Unaffected by Faddy Trends," *Billboard*, 4 March 1978, 44.

## Disco Goes Mainstream

The ways in which the innovative DJs of this early disco scene picked and mixed danceable black music helped dictate what would become the disco sound and bring about its mainstream success. Early sounds included music within the realms of black funk, rhythm and blues, Latin, and Afro-Latin, heavy on instrumental and percussion, but the specific sounds depended on the DJ and disco. The Tenth Floor, for example, leaned toward the “cool, sweet, heavily-synthesized Philadelphia sound with some tropical accents” while The Loft favored “hard, driving, heavily-percussive numbers and frantic jungle music” as well as European imports and sometimes rock.<sup>42</sup> DJs of the underground disco scene prided themselves on their skills in discovering danceable sounds that were innovative and obscure. More important than a song’s specific genre, these groundbreaking disco DJs spun records “for their ability to make people dance, not because they were already popular radio hits,” as remembered Mel Cheren, record label executive and financial backer of the Paradise Garage.<sup>43</sup> By doing so, DJs and discos pushed records into radio play based on sales, a significant departure from the standard practice, which clung to radio as the best way to “break” a record.

Underground DJs tended to be several months ahead of tight radio playlists and triggered sales on otherwise obscure records as dancers sought out those tracks that provided their most visceral response. As sales jumped and radio requests filtered in for these tracks, some became hit records on the *Billboard* charts. Soul Makossa, by Manu

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<sup>42</sup> Vince Aletti, “SoHo vs. Disco: The Story of ‘The Loft,’” *Village Voice*, 16 June 1975, 124. Also see Aletti, “Discotheque Rock ’72” and Eliot Sekuler, Dialogue, “Marc Paul Simon on Disco Promotion,” *Record World*, 6 September 1975. Gay clubs also divided by race: the Flamingo, which was predominantly white, tended to play more “happy, energetic music” while the predominantly black Paradise Garage played heavier, darker, r&b disco sounds. See Cheren, *Keep on Dancin’*, 183; Mieзитis, *Night Dancin’*, 67.

<sup>43</sup> Cheren, *Keep on Dancin’*, 101.

Dibango, is often cited as the first of these from-disco-to-hit records, discovered by David Mancuso and played at his Loft in 1972, triggering demand for the unknown French import and pushing it to the bottom of the Top 40 the following year. “Love’s Theme,” by Barry White’s Love Unlimited Orchestra, was another such record: first played by Le Jardin DJ, Bobby Guttadaro, a full year before it received radio play, it reached number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in February of 1974. Guttadaro received a gold record for his contribution to making “Love’s Theme” a hit and received the same accolades for Carl Douglas’s “Kung Fu Fighting,” and “Get Dancin’” by Disco Tex & His Sex-O-Lettes. Other key records that became hits through the disco channel were “Rock the Boat” by Hues Corporation and “Rock Your Baby” by George McCrae, each of which made it to number one on the Hot 100 in 1974. As discos became alternatives to the limited and tight radio playlists of the 1970s, record sales coming out of the discos—especially gay discos—helped feed the success of disco in the mainstream by forcing radio and record companies to take notice.<sup>44</sup>

Recognizing the potential for discos to break dance records more successfully than radio, record labels began, as early as mid-1974, to focus certain amounts of promotional energy on significant DJs and clubs. Mercury Records, for example, prompted by demand that caused the re-issuance of an originally unsuccessful single, mounted a national program focused on servicing promotional dance records to key

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<sup>44</sup> Story of Soul Mokassa and Bobby Guttadaro taken from Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 35-36. Corroborated by Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 114-115; Ribowsky, “Big Disco Dancing Boom,” 69; and Jacobson, “Hollyw-o-o-o-d!” 50-51, which also talks about “Rock the Boat.” The influence of disco play on sales discussed in the following news articles: Aletti, “Discotheque Rock ’72”; Vince Aletti, Disco File, *Record World*, 18 December 1976; Aletti, “SoHo vs. Disco”; Jim Melanson, “The Disco Phenomenon Goes On and On,” *Billboard*, 1 November 1975; Jesse Kornbluth, “Merchandizing Disco for the Masses,” *New York Times Magazine*, 18 February 1979; Bob Kirsch, “The Sound of Music: More Disco, Country Crossovers,” *Billboard*, 3 January 1976; Radcliffe Joe, “Gay Discos Breaking Key Single Hits,” *Billboard*, 9 April 1977; Clarke Taylor, “Gay Power,” *New York*, 29 August 1977. Refer to Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around* and Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day* for more detail on the industry end of this influence.

discotheques across the country.<sup>45</sup> Other labels also recognized this potential and began similar promotional services. Warner Brothers, a label that had been servicing clubs for over six years, intensified their efforts in 1974. By the following summer the label had a full-time staff member coordinating its national disco effort, some local promotional personnel, and a network of 600 DJs from all types of discos (black, gay, straight, teen, MOR) who provided regular feedback in exchange for promotional goods.<sup>46</sup> In spring 1975, major manufacturer Atlantic launched a new label aimed directly at disco DJs. The Atlantic Disco Disc Series included all “danceable” product, unlimited by genre; exposed such acts as Sister Sledge, Hot Chocolate, Herbie Mann, Barrabas, Ben E. King, and Manu Dibango; and made Atlantic one of the most important labels in supplying disco product.<sup>47</sup> Independent and subsidiary labels like Buddah, De-Lite, Midland International, and All Platinum also had staffers “devoting an increasing amount of attention to moving promotional goods to spinners.”<sup>48</sup> Some, like Scepter, Chess/Janus, and Roulette, offered DJs specially mixed singles that were extended versions of commercial releases.<sup>49</sup> Those labels that did not have their own disco promotion programs or staffers—including Chelsea, Motown, RCA, MCA, and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Records—teamed up with external agents like Mark Simon’s Provocative Promotions, servicing hundreds of DJs nationally, to get appropriate product into disco channels.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Anne Duston, “Discotheques Keyed in Mercury Service,” *Billboard*, 18 May 1974, 33.

<sup>46</sup> Melanson, “Label Eyes Discos”; Nat Freeland, “West Coast Labels Jump with Disco,” *Billboard*, 17 May 1975; Jim Melanson and Jean Williams, “Disco Community, Labels Trusting, Works Together,” *Billboard*, 9 August 1975.

<sup>47</sup> Jim Fishel, “Atlantic Jumps into Discotheque Market,” *Billboard*, 12 April 1975; Jim Fishel, “Large and Small Labels Push for Disco Exposure,” *Billboard*, 1 November 1975; Jean Williams, “Pools Decry Ebb in Record Flow,” *Billboard*, 30 April 1977.

<sup>48</sup> Melanson, “Label Eyes Discos,” 50.

<sup>49</sup> “Labels Mix Records for Club Scene,” *Billboard*, 2 November 1974.

<sup>50</sup> Freeland, “West Coast Labels”; Melanson and Williams, “Disco Community.”

In the summer of 1975, DJs in New York looking to maximize efficiency in this promotional exchange came together to form the New York Record Pool, a professional organization in which local DJs could register as members and a central location to which labels could ship promotional records to avoid the hassle of finding DJs themselves or having DJs coming to their offices in search of free product. In exchange for this service, DJs were required to provide feedback to labels and local retail outlets about those records that performed best in their clubs. By the spring of 1977, there were between thirty and thirty-five similar pools across the country with approximately 3,500 total members.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, as discotheque DJs saw their industry growing, groups such as the National Association of Discotheque Disc Jockeys (NADD) and the Southern California Disco D.J.'s Association formed and began publishing their own periodicals. Helping industry personnel stay abreast of the top music playing in the clubs, each publication included charts of top LPs and singles and playlists provided by various clubs and DJs across the country. Combined with similar charts in music industry trade magazines like *Billboard* and *Record World*, those dance records with the most potential to become hits gained exposure and crossed over to radio play and retail sales.

It is important to note, however, that while major hits tended to show up on all playlists, the lists varied extensively from disco to disco and region to region. Not all DJs were members of a record pool, and not all pools were serviced equally by the record labels, resulting in a messy and inconsistent musical landscape, the most commercial parts of which increasingly relied on Top 40 disco and only the most proven records (often with the most money and promotion behind them) to create the mainstream disco

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<sup>51</sup>Statistics on record pools from Williams, "Pools Decry Ebb." Record Pools are well documented throughout Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*; are briefly discussed in Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 36-37; and appeared regularly in the pages of *Billboard* between 1975 and 1979.

experience. What played well somewhere did not necessarily garner the same reaction from audiences elsewhere, and many record pool DJs only listed those records that were serviced to them from the record companies, even if the non-serviced records (those the DJ bought himself) actually played best in their particular market.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, as discotheques of all kinds rapidly opened across the country, there was no way for record pools to control the interests of all club owners, and as dance music scholar Tim Lawrence has pointed out, “discotheque moguls were only too happy to collaborate with a string of individualized workers who were inevitably fragmented and weak when it came to organizing demands.”<sup>53</sup> The disco-to-hit formula offered labels an alternative to radio for breaking their records and DJs a source of leverage for garnering free product, but it was often an uncertain situation over which each party had only limited control.

Following Atlantic, the record pools considered TK and Salsoul to be the most important labels in supplying disco product, but this designation did not reflect the variety and expanse of record labels that were involved in producing disco records and hits.<sup>54</sup> Especially in the early years, a disparate selection of large and small record labels—majors, independents, and subsidiaries—released and distributed, both commercially and promotionally, the danceable sounds heard in discos. Because underground and early disco music was defined by its ability to make people dance, many labels could promote records fitting that criteria. As the disco sound coalesced around the 4/4 beat, any label could layer a song over the beat and produce a disco record, even as a handful of strong disco labels came to dominate production of the biggest disco hits. Yet, even these dominant labels did not focus on disco exclusively.

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<sup>52</sup> “Pool Consensus: List Only Serviced Disks for Charts,” *Billboard*, 1 October 1977.

<sup>53</sup> Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 248.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, “Pools Decry Ebb.”

Salsoul, originally conceived as a disco label representing the blending of Latin and soul sounds, increasingly emphasized soul rather than Latin vibes, and by 1977, branched out into rap.<sup>55</sup> Miami-based TK Records, which represented such disco stars as K.C. and the Sunshine Band, George McCrae, and Peter Brown and shared the 1977 *Billboard* title of disco record label of the year, was, by early 1978, launching a program to expand beyond disco and develop its pop and R&B potential.<sup>56</sup> Even RSO, the Bee Gees' label during the height of their disco success, also represented rock guitarist Eric Clapton.

Disco was a genre of music that developed somewhat haphazardly through a collection of labels, none of which necessarily anticipated or specifically orchestrated its arrival. And as disco became increasingly commercial, those labels that could put in the most promotional money and effort behind their stars often enjoyed the biggest disco hits. Casablana Records epitomized this unexpected and promotion-based development of disco in the mainstream. After leaving Buddah Records where he had found major success in the 1960s as the king of bubblegum rock, Neil Bogart founded Casablanca Records in 1973. Initially under financial backing of Warner Brothers, Casablanca went independent in the summer of 1974, and after an initial struggle to stay afloat, made promotion their central strategy, eventually cashing in on a few big names.<sup>57</sup> Vice President Larry Harris remembered in his memoir of the company's history, "Promotion was the name of the game for us, and that's what we were: a promotion company."<sup>58</sup> But

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<sup>55</sup> "Caytronics Target: Latin Crossover to Pop: Salsoul Label Is a Trigger," *Billboard*, 19 July 1975; Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 384-385.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Grein, "Casablanca and TK Share Disco III's Label Plaudits," *Billboard*, 10 September 1977; Radcliffe Joe, "TK Mart Move," *Billboard*, 18 February 1978.

<sup>57</sup> A decent general history of Casablanca and Neil Bogart through early 1979 is offered by W. K. Knodelseder Jr., "Bogart's Biz: Play It Again, Neil," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 February 1979. For a more detailed, insider's view of the label's history see Larry Harris with Curt Gooch and Jeff Suhs, *And Party Every Day: The Inside Story of Casablanca Records* (New York: Backbeat Books, 2009).

<sup>58</sup> Harris, *And Party Every Day*, 48.

as the title to his memoir—*And Party Every Day*, a lyric from the glam metal band KISS—suggests, Casablanca’s promotional efforts were never wholly, or even most centrally, wrapped up in disco, even as the label and Bogart became “credited widely with the mainstream success of disco itself.”<sup>59</sup> If Harris’s account is any indication, KISS was always the label’s first priority, followed by George Clinton’s funk crew, Parliament, and then Donna Summer, the Village People, and its other disco (and rock) acts, even as their revenue—spent extravagantly on parties and other luxuries somehow linked to promoting their acts—increasingly came on disco alone.<sup>60</sup> Harris readily admits that before Casablanca broke Donna Summer’s “Love to Love You Baby” in late 1975, they had “barely acknowledged the existence of disco. . . . to [them] it was an arcane niche market that appealed only to a select few.”<sup>61</sup>

After Donna Summer helped them recognize that disco could be a moneymaker, Casablanca collected a growing roster of disco artists, and through its emphasis on promotion became “the disco label” in the latter half of the 1970s. Bogart knew how to spend money. He claimed to spend most of his money on “promotion, packaging, merchandising and advertising,” but he also worked in “a Moroccan-style office that looked like a vision of rock ‘n’ roll executive heaven” and was well known “as an ‘extravagant gambler who . . . goes for outrageous success and seems to come up a winner every time . . . He’s not afraid to spend large amounts of money on what he believes in and consequently he enjoys the kind of success that few in the business have

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<sup>59</sup> Knoedelseder, “Bogart’s Biz.”

<sup>60</sup> Even at the height of its success with disco, Casablanca was putting enormous amounts of money into other genres. So much expense went into promoting “The Motor Booty Affair” by Parliament that it became the most expensive single pocket album in Casablanca history. See John Sippel, “Casablanca All-Out On Parliament LP,” *Billboard*, 9 December 1978.

<sup>61</sup> Harris, *And Party Every Day*, 115.



attained.’’<sup>62</sup> The large amounts of money he spent on promoting disco helped make Casablanca and disco generally synonymous and ubiquitous in the mainstream. The label “had cocktail napkins and posters and coasters and matchbooks bearing images of [its] artists and logos . . . distributed . . . through the network of discotheques. While all this promo material didn’t help you figure out what song you were listening to, it did make the Casablanca name omnipresent, and [it] soon had . . . a very successful brand.”<sup>63</sup> So successful that in August 1977, Casablanca celebrated two years of almost continuous inclusion on *Billboard*’s National Disco Action Top 40.<sup>64</sup>

In 1977, Bogart sold a less-than controlling interest in Casablanca to Polygram right around the same time that the label expanded into film, becoming Casablanca Records and Filmworks, Inc. While Polygram became increasingly frustrated with Bogart’s extravagant spending, Casablanca flourished under its disco association until early 1980 when Bogart sold the remaining interest to Polygram and resigned as Casablanca President, citing philosophical differences as the reason for his departure.<sup>65</sup> Polygram made major cutbacks in an attempt to keep Casablanca as a profitable interest, but with the exception of the successful soundtrack to *Flashdance*, the label had lost its ability to make hits. As much as Bogart’s expenses were liabilities to Polygram, without his irrepressible promotional spending, the label failed to sustain itself. Neil Bogart died

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<sup>62</sup> Knoedelseder, “Bogart’s Biz.” Final quote credited to “one music company president.”

<sup>63</sup> Harris, *And Party Every Day*, 180.

<sup>64</sup> “Disomania: Casablanca Envisions Peak Market Penetration by Mid-Summer of ’78,” *Billboard*, 6 August 1977. In 1977, Casablanca had revenues of \$55 million, which it expected to almost double in 1978. See John Sippel, “Casablanca Bursting Seams after 38 Months,” *Billboard*, 18 March 1978.

<sup>65</sup> “Casablanca Records’ President Resigns, Sells Interest to Polygram,” *Wall Street Journal*, 13 February 1980. The circumstances surrounding Bogart’s exit from Casablanca are disputed and uncertain. For further discussion, see Harris, *And Party Every Day*, 253.

of cancer in 1982, and the music industry mourned him as “one of [the] era’s most exciting and successful recording industry entrepreneurs” and one of disco’s kings.<sup>66</sup>

Branding itself as disco helped Casablanca sell disco records commercially—people would often walk into a retail outlet and ask for whatever was new by Casablanca.<sup>67</sup> Other commercial developments also contributed to the popularity and mainstreaming of disco music. In 1975, for example, the record division of K-Tel International released one of its compilation albums entitled *K-Tel Presents Super Hits of the Superstars*, which included the Top 40 disco hits of the day—including “Rock the Boat,” “Get Dancin’,” and “The Hustle”—side by side with MOR favorite Barry Manilow, R&B group Gladys Knight & the Pips, and rock personality Elton John.<sup>68</sup> In 1976 K-Tel would release its first disco compilation, *Disco Dynamite*, and would continue both kinds of commercial disco exposure throughout the 1970s.<sup>69</sup> As it did for a variety of other products, K-Tel pioneered the television marketing of compilation albums and put them in retail outlets such as Woolworth’s, Montgomery Ward, and Sears to maximize exposure; in the 1970s, record sales became K-Tel’s biggest moneymaker.<sup>70</sup> The option to buy a single album with a variety of hits rather than commit oneself to multiple singles or albums with only one hit song meant such compilations gave disco music exposure among buyers who would have otherwise ignored it. In 1977, TK, Salsoul, and London released disco compilation albums from their own catalogues. TK’s sales manager announced that its *Disco Party* would have at least four million-selling hits

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<sup>66</sup> Sam Southerland, “Neil Bogart’s Death Mourned by Industry,” *Billboard*, 22 May 1982. Also see other coverage in *Billboard* on that date.

<sup>67</sup> Harris, *And Party Everyday*, 180.

<sup>68</sup> *K-Tel Presents Super Hits of the Superstars*, K-Tel International, 1975. Citation and contents information accessed via WorldCat online database.

<sup>69</sup> *K-Tel Presents Disco Dynamite*, K-Tel International, 1976. Citation and contents information for this and a variety of other K-Tel compilations accessed via WorldCat online database.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Davis, “Get Your 25 Polka Greats for Only \$4.98!” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 April 1974.

in an attempt “to attract more than just the disco freaks.”<sup>71</sup> Such commercial strategies combined with the promotion efforts of record labels contributed to disco’s mainstream success. Most industry observers agreed that by the middle of 1975, the lead time between making it on disco playlists and being added to radio programming had shrunk significantly from months to weeks, and in the two years since “Rock the Boat” first paved the way for disco to top the Hot 100, nearly fifty more disco songs had reached the top ten.<sup>72</sup> If *Billboard* and its charts are any indication of popular taste, disco music had become decisively mainstream between 1974 and 1976, well before *Saturday Night Fever* would catapult it into new realms of ubiquity.

With disco records regularly finding their place on the pop charts, the culture of disco as a mainstream pastime soon followed. Luis H. Moret remembered his first trip to a major disco in early 1973 as an exhilarating experience, in part because of its exceptionalism: “the disco scene was a very select and esoteric form of entertainment; it was very much for the people ‘in the know’ so to speak. The disco population at the time was almost exclusively composed of young gays, artists, Blacks, and others who were into dancing.”<sup>73</sup> Over the next few years, however, mainstream society caught on to the nightlife being enjoyed by an underground subculture and began inviting themselves to the party. Le Jardin, in New York City, epitomized the early influx of straight society

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<sup>71</sup> Paul Grein, “3 Labels Package Hits in Looped Club Sound LP Sets,” *Billboard*, 22 October 1977, 64. The article’s claim that “This is believed to be the first time labels have attempted to market disco samplers,” suggested that while K-Tel’s records sold well in the 1970s, *Billboard* either did not classify it as a record label (perhaps because they did not sign artists but instead bought the rights to songs from other labels) or did not consider it a substantive force in the record industry.

<sup>72</sup> Jim Melanson, “Discomania,” *Billboard*, 17 May 1975; Paul Grein, “Disco Contributions Impressive,” *Billboard*, 25 July 1976.

<sup>73</sup> Luis H. Moret, “Where Do We Go from Here?” *Discotheekin’*, March 1976, 22.

into the disco scene.<sup>74</sup> Opened in June 1973, as a club for gay gentlemen, Le Jardin combined hardcore partying with chic sophistication. Owner John Addison courted the celebrity and glamorous crowd with his art deco roof garden, palm trees, banquets, and high-tech lighting while also bringing in the serious dancers of the gay community by hiring top DJ, Bobby Guttadaro, and establishing an open-admissions policy. The visibility generated by its Times Square location, media coverage, and open-door policy created a mixed club that quickly gained a reputation as one of the hippest nightspots in New York. Initially enjoyed by an “in” crowd of gay men, “hip” straights and celebrities, the numbers of non-gay dancers patronizing Le Jardin grew so much that by the end of 1975, its original gay and celebrity clientele moved on to new haunts, leaving Le Jardin to the masses, taken over by the “bridge-and-tunnel” crowd. Le Jardin and similar open-admission gay discos in major cities across the country became glitter palaces of bisexual chic—associated with androgynous and “genderfuck” fashions—with heterosexuals (and a few residual gays) “acting and looking [in 1975] the way gays did three years ago.”<sup>75</sup> The hardcore gay party crowd moved on to more casual, less mainstream places where a more butch sensibility developed.<sup>76</sup> And eager businessmen looked to cash in on disco’s appeal to young straights of the mainstream.

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<sup>74</sup> The following brief description of Le Jardin’s history is based on those accounts in Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 190-192 and Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 96-99, 178-181.

<sup>75</sup> John Lombardi, “Selling Gay to the Masses,” *Village Voice*, 30 June 1975, 10.

<sup>76</sup> For example, in Chicago, Bogart’s opened in the early 1970s as a gay establishment, but by 1974, the owner described it as “95 per cent straight now, and the gays that come here come like everybody else—to be seen.” Bogart’s straight owner had not restricted his patronage in the same way that the gay owner of his uptown counterpart, Dugan’s Bistro, had. As a result, the gay crowd abandoned Bogart’s in favor of Dugan’s—“People may go to Bogart’s to glitter, but gays come to the Bistro to dance and be comfortable.” Lyn Van Matre, “Secure Sexuality . . . and the Scene Sells,” *Chicago Tribune*, 7 April 1974. For elaboration on “genderfuck” and “butch” fashions in gay community, see my discussion of Clone Culture in Chapter 7.

In the years after Le Jardin and before *Saturday Night Fever*, entrepreneurs opened thousands of discos of all varieties across the country, and the disco industry expanded substantially. As early as May 1974, *Billboard* announced, “Discotheques now can be found in all communities, from large cities to small towns, across the nation.”<sup>77</sup> Over the next few years, discotheques opened in hotels and on cruise ships; restaurant lounges were converted to accommodate dancing; bars and concert venues replaced live acts with recorded music; a thriving mobile disco industry emerged to create a party atmosphere anywhere people could imagine; and Jimmy Carter used a mobile disco firm to celebrate his presidential victory with a dance party in November 1976.<sup>78</sup> By that time, there were an estimated 10,000 discotheques across the United States, and this number would more than double by the end of the decade.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, these discos ran the gamut of variety: “There are discos for the hoi-polloi and the hoity-toity. There are kiddie discos and discos for the elderly. There are mobile discos which can service private parties. There are straight and gay discos, discos which are mostly black or mostly white, and there are discos which are black-white-Spanish-gay-straight and whoever else might drop in.”<sup>80</sup> Whether or not individual discos were integrated (by

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<sup>77</sup> Duston, “Discotheques Keyed,” 33.

<sup>78</sup> “First Hotel Disco Opens in Nevada,” *Billboard*, 9 November 1974; Sara Lane, “On Two Ships out of Miami: Discos Now at Sea,” *Billboard*, 27 November 1976; Steve Toy, “Rebirth of Discotheques Giving Music Biz a Shot in the Arm,” *Variety*, 26 February 1975; Melanson, “Discomania”; Jim Melanson, “Says an Expert: Savvy, Not Money Makes Club Work,” *Billboard*, 29 November 1975; John Sippel, “Alt. Sound Firm Selected for Carter Election Fete,” *Billboard*, 6 November 1976. The new president also featured disco dancing at his inaugural ball: “Inaugural Hustle,” *Billboard*, 22 January 1977.

<sup>79</sup> Maureen Orth, Betsy Carter, Lisa Whitman, “Get Up and Boogie!” *Newsweek*, 8 November 1976, 94; Joe, *This Business of Disco*, 185.

<sup>80</sup> Johnson, “Discotheque Scene,” 56. For more on the variety of discotheques and their infiltration into the heart of America before *Saturday Night Fever*, see Tom Perew, “Disco Craze Sweeps the Country,” *Soul*, 7 July 1975; Elaine Markoutsas, “9-Year-Old Swingers Have Ball at Dingbat’s,” *Chicago Tribune*, 25 April 1976; “Warehouse Disco Woos Passive Vermont Crowd,” *Billboard*, 21 August 1976; “Hotpots of the Urban Night,” *Time*, 27 June 1977, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915091,00.html>; Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 194-196.

any number of factors), when disco came aboveground and into the mainstream, the industry itself managed to cross lines of gender, race, class, age, and sexuality.

Part of the expansion of disco entertainment in the mainstream was the growth of disco chains and franchises, spreading their names and winning formulas to multiple locations. *Billboard* reported on a number of disco chains experiencing substantial growth in the years leading up to *Saturday Night Fever*.<sup>81</sup> Considered America's oldest discotheque chain, Uncle Sam's opened its first club in Cincinnati, Ohio, in the mid-1960s, and had expanded to nine locations nationally by September 1975 (at least two of those locations opening since December 1974)—from Buffalo to Des Moines, and from Minneapolis to Houston, even Lincoln, Nebraska, and Maxville, Tennessee.<sup>82</sup> Uncle Sam's clubs charged between \$1 and \$3 for admission and attracted an audience of mostly young adults (18 to 22 years of age), but many of the clubs also had separate lounges where "more mature patrons" could listen to music at lower decibels and watch the dance floor through a glass dividing wall. The chain's ability to sustain business, even grow, during the years of disco's supposed disfavor in the mainstream suggests that dancing to recorded music in public venues was never the exclusive domain of underground, minority subcultures. Yet, the admission by the firm's promotion director that "business has never been better than during the last six months [of 1974]" and the

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<sup>81</sup> In addition to the chains and franchises I discuss here, *Billboard* reported on the Bobby McGee chain with five clubs in the Southwest region of the U.S., Big Daddy's in Florida and Los Angeles, and Giraffe Discotheques located mostly in the Midwest. See Claude Hall, "Discotheques Continue to Grow; Up 10% In 6 Months," *Billboard*, 28 September 1974; Anne Duston, "IUC Chain Grows: 9 Giraffes Jumping, 2 More Are Coming," *Billboard*, 16 August 1975; and "175,616 Patterns At Giraffe Club," *Billboard*, 4 October 1975.

<sup>82</sup> Information about the Uncle Sam's disco chain taken from John Sippel, "6 Uncle Sam's Discos Stimulate Dancers," *Billboard*, 21 December 1974; Jim Melanson, "6 Uncle Sam's Discos Up; More Coming," *Billboard*, 8 February 1975; John Sippel, "Uncle Sam's Discos Junk Franchises, Still Prosper," *Billboard*, 13 September 1975. The information reported in these articles is somewhat inconsistent: the December 1974 article reported that there were six clubs but listed seven locations; December 1974 also stated that the first club opened ten years ago while the September 1975 article reported only eight years.

fact that nine months later the clubs were attracting 10,000 more weekly patrons, are indicative of disco's superior mainstream potential and increasing popularity in the mid-1970s.<sup>83</sup> As the manager of Uncle Sam's in Minneapolis understood, "the company's growth in recent years, coming mainly in mid-American markets, reflects the impact of discotheques on the entertainment scene."<sup>84</sup>

Disco was certainly growing in the mainstream, but Uncle Sam's and other commercial chains remained outside the vanguard of the new music and trends, in part because of their unique blend of standardization and freedom. Uncle Sam's clubs were owned and operated by their parent company of American Scene, Inc., which screened and approved possible locations for each new disco and built the same lighting and sound system in each location, which consisted of a light-up plexiglass dance floor and computerized chase-rotate-and-flash lighting that matched the rhythm of the music. In addition, playlists for each Uncle Sam's DJ came from the home office in Cincinnati, which bought most of its records from Record Source International (RSI), a *Billboard* firm that serviced records to radio stations. Their promotional director was ignored by each label he had contacted to request free promotional services. As a result, even the "new releases" that the Cincinnati club played for the first two hours of each evening tended to be weeks behind those clubs serviced directly by record labels. Lack of service hindered a chain's ability to be the most innovative, but the centrally provided playlists did not mandate an identical experience at every Uncle Sam's disco. Playlists were "used primarily as guidelines. The individual spinner and manager in each club [was] allowed

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<sup>83</sup> Promotional director, Scott Savickas, quoted in Sippel, "Stimulate Dancers," 12; for attendance stats, see Sippel, "Junk Franchises, Still Prosper."

<sup>84</sup> Melanson, "6 Uncle Sam's Discos Up," 3.

to work their audiences as they [saw] fit.”<sup>85</sup> Such a strategy resulted in combinations of disco, R&B, rock, and pop that varied from club to club within the chain.

A similar situation existed with the Dimples chain of discotheques, begun by parent firm Emerson’s Ltd. in December 1974—a response to the growing popularity of dance clubs, said Michael O’Harro, director of the company’s disco division.<sup>86</sup> Each Dimples discotheque was a converted lounge in an Emerson steakhouse, and by November 1975, the chain had twenty-six clubs in eight states, with only a handful of these situated in major cities. Like with Uncle Sam’s, each Dimples DJ was given a core playlist—a weekly Top 30, 100 current dance numbers, and 100 disco selections from previous years, all compiled by O’Harro and his staff—from which to choose the programming to best energize the audience (it is unclear where Dimples discos received or bought their records). Perhaps more restrictive in their playlist parameters than Uncle Sam’s, there was still some leeway for individuality and freedom from DJ to DJ and club to club in the Dimples formula. The disco franchise 2001 Clubs of America adhered to the most extreme example of playlist standardization by relying on pre-taped and computerized music and light programming rather than professional DJs.<sup>87</sup> Yet, president of 2001 Clubs, Tom Jayson, explained “that although the clubs have all remained essentially turnkey operations, in that they are all operated the same way, each new club today has an identity of its own.”<sup>88</sup> He went on to compare the Memphis club, which was “a revolving extravaganza, atop a high-rise building,” to the Long Island Club,

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<sup>85</sup> Melanson, “6 Uncle Sam’s Discos Up,” 3.

<sup>86</sup> Jim Melanson, “New Playlist: Disco Chain,” *Billboard*, 5 April 1975. Also see Jim Melanson, “19 Clubs in Dimples Disco Web,” *Billboard*, 19 July 1975 and Stephen Traiman, “Dimples Chain Seeking More Clubs, Its Label,” *Billboard*, 1 November 1975.

<sup>87</sup> Anne Duston, “Discos Run by Computer to Be U.S. Franchised,” *Billboard*, 10 May 1975.

<sup>88</sup> “Club Chains: Despite Dire Predictions, Peaceful Relations Exist with Independents,” *Billboard*, 3 September 1977, 48.



which based its theme on Walt Disney World, as examples. It was important to chain and franchise operators that their systems seem as open to uniqueness as possible in order to defend their place and ensure their continued solvency and growth within an industry supposedly predicated on individual freedom and expression. Operators became even more insistent on the uniqueness of each individual club in the post-*Saturday Night Fever* years when discotheques mushroomed and franchises and chains became wary of being labeled the “Burger Kings of Disco.”<sup>89</sup>

Less innovative than the underground or early urban clubs, the standardization and commercialism of chains and franchises were important because they helped disco spread to a wider audience, and their growth and popularity suggest that the disco experience and music held meaning for groups beyond homosexuals and other minorities. However, as large as some franchises and chains grew, they were never so significant that they engulfed the mainstream disco experience in standardization. Most of the discotheques opened in the mid- to late-1970s were distinct operations, usually opened to fit a need within their specific locale. According to the *Washington Post*, “Most discos . . . are spaces converted from other uses . . . generally [for] \$10-\$25,000, and are relatively inexpensive to operate.” Indeed, “the cost of a disc jockey, especially when compared to the expense of live entertainment, [was] small,” presenting the possibility for at least short-term, modest profit for those who could make their investment work and large windfalls for those who succeeded within more elite markets.<sup>90</sup>

One of the most popular and enduring of such elite discotheques was Georgetown’s Tramps Disco, opened in 1975, by Michael O’Harro, who by that time had

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<sup>89</sup> Bob Riedinger, Jr., “Franchised Clubs Like Burger Kings Soon?” *Billboard*, 3 March 1979.

<sup>90</sup> Matthew L. Wald, “Night of the Disco,” *Washington Post*, 26 July 1976.

left Emerson's Ltd. and their Dimples chain to open a disco of his own. O'Harro had gained fame and monetary success in the 1960s by cashing in on the era's increasingly evident culture of young singles, developing a popular dating service and opening what some commentators claim was the first singles bar. After some time off from the singles concept in the early 1970s, he found renewed success by relocating the boy-meets-girl theory to the discotheque.<sup>91</sup> O'Harro opened Tramps in a part of the long-standing Georgetown restaurant Billy Martin's Carriage House with a décor that he described as "elegant" and a "revival of chic"—potted palms, mirrors, an antique copper-covered bar, and marble dance floor.<sup>92</sup> Tramps was a popular and expensive club, frequently filled to capacity, visited by celebrities, and charging \$2.50 for drinks (compared to \$.75 at some places), ultimately grossing O'Harro \$100,000 per year as executive director. He maintained his desired ambiance by practicing a strict door policy and dress code that earned Tramps a reputation as a club for "beautiful people"—"We don't want construction workers, merrymakers on the make, conventioners, motorcycle types, blue-collar workers, hippies or dirty people," O'Harro told *People* magazine.<sup>93</sup>

The article garnered angry responses from people who identified with the categories he openly excluded.<sup>94</sup> But it is important to note that while Tramps may have

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<sup>91</sup>For background information on Michael O'Harro and descriptions of Tramps's décor, policies, and operations see Gary Clifford, In the Money, *People*, 23 August 1976; Wald, "Night of the Disco"; Judy Bachrach, "The Lines May Change, the Ritual's the Same," *Washington Post*, 24 May 1976; Lynn Darling, "The Prince of Disco," *Washington Post*, 5 August 1979; and Marlene Cmons, "Glendale's Michael O'Harro," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 February 1978.

<sup>92</sup> O'Harro quoted in Clifford, In the Money, 66 and Cmons, "Glendale's Michael O'Harro," 11.

<sup>93</sup> Beyond the strict admissions policy at his club that favored "beautiful people," O'Harro himself had some sexist ideas about male-female relations. Many of the articles listed above described him as celebrating the unmarried lifestyle, dating and sleeping with women well more than a decade his junior who he chose for their looks and because he enjoyed "being their Svengali." He also wrote a discotheque operating manual that Lynn Darling quoted as advising, "To make the whole idea jell, the main ingredient is girls, the foxier the better. If you create the atmosphere where the fine girls go, the men will follow." See especially Darling, "Prince of Disco."

<sup>94</sup> Letters to the editor, *People*, 13 September 1976.

been the Washington, D.C. area's most well-known discotheque, the city's larger club scene was much more varied and inclusive than the elegant and restrictive confines of Tramps. There were other formal and exclusive discos such as Foxtrappe, an African-American membership club requiring semi-formal and evening attire, but in the years before *Saturday Night Fever*, Washington, D.C. also boasted The Last Hurrah, a club requiring no dress code that appealed to both whites and blacks; at least three large gay or mixed clubs with no dress code, variously decorated from stylish and plush to flashing lights surrounding a circular stage; small rooms painted red or with mirrored dance areas frequented by straight college students and young professionals; discos like Up Wisconsin, The Godfather, and the Rabbit's Foot that accommodated young straight crowds; a teen disco called Disco Fire where an integrated clientele danced the night away in both casual and dressy disco attire; even 13<sup>th</sup> Street Club, a once-a-week daytime disco charging a single dollar admission for "secretaries, clerk-typists, file clerks, mailroom clerks, postal workers, and laborers" wearing their everyday work clothes to dance away their lunch hour.<sup>95</sup> Other areas of the country hosted a similar variety of clubs in order to cater to as wide a spectrum of residents as possible.<sup>96</sup>

Beyond the variety of clubs, disco expanded substantially as an industry and culture and found its way into various media outlets, so those who did not dance in the discotheques surely knew about its growth and popularity. *Billboard*, a trade magazine dedicated to promoting the disco industry in all its variety, thoroughly reported on all

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<sup>95</sup> Disco descriptions from Randolph, "Discos More Than Bars and Dancing"; Zito, "Anything's Cool"; Robert F. Levey, "Disco Fire: The Music's Loud, the Drink Soft," *Washington Post*, 20 January 1977; Joel Dreyfuss, "A Little Hustle, a Little Bump for a Midday Escape," *Washington Post*, 29 October 1975.

<sup>96</sup> For other examples of discotheque variety, see Radcliffe Joe, "Texan Spends \$2 Mil on Clubs," *Billboard*, 19 March 1977; Laura Deni, "Discotheques Newest Rage in Nevada," *Billboard*, 25 January 1975; "The Disco Beat," *Billboard*, 27 November 1976; and Pat Colander, "Singles Bars, 1975 styles: Discos Are In, Jeans Are Out," *Chicago Tribune*, 21 March 1975. Contrary to its title, Colander's article does describe clubs where jeans and casual dress were common.

aspects of disco's development, and other newspapers and magazines began coverage of the disco craze early in its aboveground growth. Major metropolitan newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* included their first headlines about the new entertainment by or before the middle of 1975. *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* all had major features on disco in 1976. If people did not read about it, they certainly could hear it and see it. Disco radio—in the form of disco hours, disco evenings, even 24-hour disco formats—hit the airwaves in late 1975 and early 1976, and disco television shows began debuting on local networks at the same time.<sup>97</sup> What started as an exclusive scene for those “in the know” had, by the mid-1970s, become an entertainment craze for anyone wanting to indulge and a profitable industry for those looking for quick cash in a repressed economy. Disco was a truly mainstream entertainment form by 1975 that would grow into a ubiquitous mass cultural form in the years to come.

By 1976, disco had become such a craze that insiders began to debate its longevity. “There’s a general admission among disco industry leaders,” reported *Billboard* that July, “that the scene is in a rut; that it’s all become too formulized and predictable, and that something must be done soon to keep it from going stale”—summarizing a sentiment that had infiltrated its pages several months earlier.<sup>98</sup> To owners and promoters, the discotheque business seemed so saturated with clubs fighting

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<sup>97</sup> Jean Williams, “Soul Sauce: Disco Sound on WBOK, New Orleans” *Billboard*, 1 November 1975; Vince Aletti, Disco File, *Record World*, 27 December 1975; Marc Kirkeby, “Disco-Oriented Radio on the Rise,” *Record World*, 31 January 1976; Sara Lane, “Disco Radio: Fort Lauderdale’s WSRF-AM Tees Off New Southeast Concept,” *Billboard*, 31 January 1976; Radcliffe Joe, “DJ’s Foresight Brings Scranton Radio Disco,” *Billboard*, 12 March 1977; Jean Williams, “TV Disco Programs Just Keep Coming On,” *Billboard*, 26 July 1975; “Disco Trend Swinging on TV; Value of Song Plug Multiplied,” *Variety*, 19 November 1975; Marty Angelo with Michael Clark, *Once Life Matters: A New Beginning* (Oxnard, CA: Marty Angelo Ministries, 2005), 136-141.

<sup>98</sup> Paul Grein, “Is the Disco Scene in a Rut?” *Billboard*, 31 July 1976, 38.

for crowds that they brought in new attractions, live acts, and multimedia entertainment formats to attract patrons.<sup>99</sup> The music, especially, seemed to have reached a point of stagnation because of the glut of material produced by acts jumping on the disco bandwagon. Commentators described disco as “formula style music” that lent itself to the production of numerous readymade and throwaway records, including the remixing of old standards to a disco beat.<sup>100</sup> Staunch defender of disco, Vince Aletti, lamented the lack of vitality and creativity in the music of early 1976, and it was this kind of criticism that had some labels already renaming “disco” as “dance music” and others creating a more innovative sound that would make disco less readily identifiable and retain its popularity.<sup>101</sup> DJs complained that the record industry had bastardized the pure form of disco—i.e., a DJ with turntable discovering the newest in danceable sounds—by flooding the market with mediocre music to the point of its near death.<sup>102</sup> Despite such uncertainty and criticism, most experts were optimistic about disco’s resiliency and increasing mainstream popularity, believing that innovation and vitality remained amidst the glut of ready-mades and that disco as a place to go could easily outlast even the end of disco as a musical form, especially because it still had plenty of room to expand into the American hinterlands.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Jim Melanson, “Discomania Maintains Pace for 1976 Growth,” *Billboard*, 3 January 1976; Radcliffe Joe, “Sexy Sideshows Titillating N.Y. and Vegas Discogers,” *Billboard*, 14 August 1976; “Deejays Not Enough: Detroit Clubs Go for ‘Human’ Sound,” *Billboard*, 21 May 1977; “Philly Club Offer Jazz,” *Billboard*, 28 May 1977.

<sup>100</sup> Kirsch, “The Sound of Music,” 39; Vince Aletti, Disco File, *Record World*, 27 December 1975; “Uncle Sam’s Exec Flays Belligerent DJs’ Stance,” *Billboard*, 7 February 1976; Vince Aletti, Disco File, *Record World*, 14 February 1976.

<sup>101</sup> Vince Aletti, Disco File, *Record World*, 14 February 1976; Radcliffe Joe, “Disco Music Sounds Undergoing Changes,” *Billboard*, 2 October 1976.

<sup>102</sup> Alex Kabbaz, “Viewpoint: The Rape of an Industry – Part I,” *Discotheke*, March 1976; Moret, “Where Do We Go from Here?”

<sup>103</sup> This optimism amidst uncertainty is especially prevalent in the pages of *Billboard* throughout 1976 and is also addressed in other trade papers, including *Record World* and *Discotheke*. For specific statements refer to the following articles: Grein, “Disco Scene in a Rut?”; Vince Aletti, Disco File, *Record World*, 27

## Disco Becomes Mass Culture

1977 was an especially crucial year in solidifying disco's success as a mainstream, mass marketed cultural form: The combined events of Studio 54's opening in April and the release of the hit movie *Saturday Night Fever* in December, caused disco's popularity to skyrocket, making it the ubiquitous phenomenon that most people remember today. The iconic club that nearly everyone thinks of when remembering disco—Studio 54—opened on 26 April 1977, with a party of A-list guests and barely controlled chaos. After a slow post-opening week, the disco played host to a birthday party for Bianca Jagger. The photograph of her entering the dance floor astride a white horse became a media sensation that made Studio 54 the hottest and most iconic disco in the nation. Owned by business partners Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager, Studio 54 is remembered for its velvet rope, manned by doorman Marc Benecke and used to separate the crowd within—a carefully “tossed salad” often dictated by Rubell himself—from the masses trying to gain admission outside. The legendary scene inside the club was made famous by the impressive sound system, ever-changing light show, and decorations; by the drugs, generously provided by Rubell to his guests and celebrated nightly when The Man in the Moon dropped from the ceiling, a string of lights flickering from the spoon at its nose; by the infamous balcony and VIP rooms, where any variety of debaucheries was said to occur; and by its list of celebrity regulars, both real (Jagger, Andy Warhol, Liza Minnelli, Halston, Brooke Shields, etc.) and created (Disco Sally, Rollerena). Its location in a converted television studio that was once a Broadway opera house was the perfect setting for what became the epitome of disco as theatre—offering each dancer (even the

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December 1975; Kirsch, “The Sound of Music”; Melanson, “Discomania Maintains Pace.” See also Barbara Graustark, Janet Huck, Peggy Clausen, and Ronald Henkoff, “Disco Takes Over,” *Newsweek*, 2 April 1979, 57 and Joe, *This Business of Disco*, 100.

would-be dancers outside) the chance to be a star in looks as diverse as elegant gowns and black ties to virtual nudity and extravagant costumes.<sup>104</sup>

The massive amounts of ink spilt about the club brought attention to disco's aboveground success, but Studio 54 was not universally praised nor was it indicative of what the disco experience was all about. Many "ordinary" people may have been lucky enough to pass Rubell's judgmental screening, but many more would never make it beyond the velvet ropes. In response, Studio 54 earned a reputation as snobbish and elitist, the epitome of "Me Decade" narcissism and the general commercialization of American culture—criticized as being "but one more phenomenon in the celebrity-mad '70s bringing us closer to a realization of Andy Warhol's shrewd dictum: 'In the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes.'"<sup>105</sup> Moreover, Studio 54 was constantly wrapped up in controversy over proper licensing, unfair labor practices, and complaints over its restrictive door policy. In a fitting end to its notorious run as New York's—the nation's, perhaps the world's—most popular and exclusive discotheque, Studio 54's owners were charged and convicted of tax evasion, sentenced to three and half years in prison. The club closed its doors in March 1980, soon after Rubell and Schragar had begun serving their sentence.<sup>106</sup> Studio 54 was a paragon of "capitalist decadence," a fantasy world in which no expense would be spared to put on the best possible party for

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<sup>104</sup> Rubell and Schragar actually used theatre consultants for input on design and concept: Radcliffe Joe, "Studio 54 Disco Bypasses Cliches for Theatrical Input," *Billboard*, 21 May 1977. For more information on the history of Studio 54 see Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 206-214; Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 269-282; Anthony Haden-Guest, *The Last Party: Studio 54, Disco, and the Culture of the Night* (New York: William Morrow, 1997). For some contemporary press on the happenings at Studio 54 see Robert McG. Thomas Jr., "Discotheque Opens Despite Its Leaking Waterfall," *New York Times*, 27 April 1977; Anna Quindlen, "What's New in the Discotheques," *New York Times*, 11 November 1977; Rita Hamilton, "New York Night Looks," *Esquire*, November 1979; Bob Colacello, "Steve Rubell: In the Heat of the Night," *Interview*, February 1979.

<sup>105</sup> Daniel Henninger, "The Sweet Life, New York, 1977," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 1977.

<sup>106</sup> Studio 54 reopened under new ownership in 1981, but would never regain the fame it had under Rubell.

the most beautiful, privileged, energized crowd—an image intentionally fostered and celebrated by its management.<sup>107</sup> While the publicity and media that surrounded Studio 54 may have enticed disco neophytes or curious observers to try their best to make it past the velvet ropes or to explore the next best thing in their hometown, it also repelled and intimidated people because of how it presented (big-city) disco as a scene of “snobbish exclusion.”<sup>108</sup> Ultimately, the Studio 54 experience did not represent the disco culture that millions of Americans across the country took part in during the 1970s. As Barry Cunningham wrote in *Cosmopolitan*, “Sure, you may *read* more about New York’s Studio 54, but many more people will actually experience discos that resemble ‘2001.’”<sup>109</sup>

2001 Odyssey was the name of the discotheque where Tony Manero and his gang, the “Faces,” danced in the hit movie *Saturday Night Fever*, which was even more important to the explosion of disco popularity than Studio 54 because of the ways it appealed and was accessible to a broad cross section of the American public. Not only did the Robert Stigwood Organization capitalize on the already growing popularity of disco and cash in on strong cross-fertilization between the movie, the soundtrack, and the discos themselves; the themes of the film resonated with American society at the time. When Tony Manero entered 2001 Odyssey, he entered a world completely separate from his everyday life as “a nondescript 19-year-old salesclerk in a paint-and-hardware store, harassed at home, insecure, uneducated,” and seemingly trapped within the dead-end life of working-class America.<sup>110</sup> In 2001, Tony was king, the best dancer on the floor, a

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<sup>107</sup> Taki, “Studio 54 Is Over,” *Esquire*, 24 April 1979, 57.

<sup>108</sup> Stephen Pickover, “Stayin’ Alive in Local Discos,” *Michigan Daily*, 7 September 1978, 42.

<sup>109</sup> Barry Cunningham, “Discorama,” *Cosmopolitan*, September 1978, 223.

<sup>110</sup> Movie, *Playboy*, March 1978, 33.



Face, someone whom others admired. Disco dancing at 2001 was his means of escape to a place where all races and ethnicities seem to dance in harmony and hard-work pays off in the form of tight pants, colorful shirts, and leather jackets that induce confidence and adoration. In the hard economic times of the 1970s, many Americans could identify with the scenario. Moreover, as scholars have argued, the movie's portrayal of the disco scene helped make disco appealing for the more conservative, "Middle American," element of the mainstream not yet turned on to the disco trend—the older, more suburban, less cosmopolitan members of society who take up trends only when they become "safe" or unavoidable, who went to see *Saturday Night Fever* out of curiosity and to see what had caught the interest of so many, perhaps purchasing the catchy soundtrack on the way home.<sup>111</sup> The movie's soundtrack, dominated by the music of the Bee Gees, and John Travolta starring as Tony Manero, helped make the dance craze acceptable for straight whites, particularly straight white men, who might have previously shied away from an entertainment form associated with blacks and gays.<sup>112</sup>

*Saturday Night Fever* was raking in \$600,000 daily by the spring of 1978, and grossed over \$110 million during its initial run.<sup>113</sup> The soundtrack was perhaps even more influential, hitting number one on the *Billboard* charts on 21 January 1978, and holding the spot until early July. In the summer of 1977, TK Record's Promotion man,

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<sup>111</sup> Indeed, *Billboard* reported that record stores across the country were seeing sales of the soundtrack to "customers of all ages and tastes," including "oldsters who never buy pop albums." "They're not record buyers but they've obviously seen the movie and like it," said one store owner. See Dick Nusser, "Dealers Say 'Fever' Igniting Other Sales," *Billboard*, 6 May 1978.

<sup>112</sup> John-Manuel Androite, *Hot Stuff: A Brief History of Disco* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 4, 38-48.; Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 202-205 and Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 303-307. I will conduct further analysis of *Saturday Night Fever*, especially in relation to the gender and sexual conventions of the time, in the next chapter.

<sup>113</sup> "Sleeper of '78, 'Sat. Nite Fever' Hits 600G Daily," *Variety*, 19 April 1978; William Kelly, "More Than a Woman: Myth and Mediation in *Saturday Night Fever*," *Journal of American Culture* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 235.

Ray Caviano, believed that disco music was “at a critical crossroads in its development,” saying, “The events of the coming months could decide whether disco grows as a legitimate business or returns to being a sub-culture of American entertainment.”<sup>114</sup> With *Saturday Night Fever* marketed and purchased in such staggering proportions, disco quickly crossed the threshold of “legitimate business.” Not only did a broad swath of the American public view, purchase, and enjoy the movie and soundtrack; *Saturday Night Fever* fostered spin-off sales of other disco product and paved the way for even more disco on Top 40 radio and charts.<sup>115</sup>

With the success of *Saturday Night Fever*, the major record labels established fully-staffed disco departments and devoted increased resources to producing and marketing disco-oriented products.<sup>116</sup> What had once been a curious attempt to promote danceable music through discotheques and DJs, became full commitments to promoting and creating disco music through all possible channels and artists, threatening to push out smaller labels and take over the variety and diversity that had made up disco music in its early years. In the summer of 1979, *Record World* reported that “a handful of major labels are dominating disco charts and rapidly diminishing the role of the small independents who helped give disco its start.”<sup>117</sup> By that time, even Casablanca was no longer independent, having sold significant interest to the major label, Polygram. TK and Motown remained the only two independents in the top half of *Record World*’s Disco Top 40 the last two weeks of July. While smaller labels still came up with hits, making

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<sup>114</sup> Caviano quoted in Robert Ford Jr., “The Changing Sound of Records,” *Billboard*, 3 September 1977, 62.

<sup>115</sup> Nusser, “‘Fever’ Igniting Other Sales”; Ed Harrison, “Crossover Potential Is Vital to Disco Albums,” *Billboard*, 11 February 1978.

<sup>116</sup> Robert Ford, Jr., “Many Labels Tardy in Reacting to New Music,” *Billboard*, 3 March 1979.

<sup>117</sup> Marc Kirkeby, “Major Labels Dominate Disco Chart as Competition for Airplay Builds,” *Record World*, 28 July 1979, 3.

up significant portions of the Disco Top 40's latter half, the competition that had developed in the disco field put those labels with the largest promotional and A&R (artist and repertoire) staffs and budgets on top. The investment in and popularity of disco also meant a deluge of disco music on the radio and pop charts—enough for *Billboard* to debut a Disco Top 40 Sales chart in April 1978—put out by many new acts as well as by acts otherwise distinct from the disco genre. Big-name rock artists like the Rolling Stones and Rod Stewart had hits with disco-oriented tracks, and even Disney and *Sesame Street* got in on the action. By February 1979, *Billboard* reported that radio was once again challenging discos as the main venue for breaking hit records.<sup>118</sup> Disco had very nearly become the definition of pop music.

Disco's astonishing growth in the wake of Studio 54 and *Saturday Night Fever* created a commercial phenomenon that was not just mainstream culture, but was truly mass culture—mass-produced and mass-marketed by the largest of companies—popular in a sense that an increasingly wide cross-section of people participated in some way (listening, dancing, purchasing), and practically no one could avoid its ubiquity. The disco phenomenon exploded so much in 1978 and 1979 that by the end of the decade there were approximately twenty thousand discos across the United States.<sup>119</sup> Most discotheques at this time played disco music, if only because it was the kind of music record labels rushed to cash in on and thus provided to the record pools and DJs. Yet, disco music never held exclusive reign in the clubs; even at the height of “disco fever,” it

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<sup>118</sup> Radcliffe Joe, “Disco Radio Challenges Clubs as Hitmaker”, *Billboard*, 10 February 1979; “Disco Sales Chart in Billboard Soon,” *Billboard*, 1 April 1978; Harrison, “Crossover Potential”; Adam White, “Disco Crossovers Heat Summer Pop Charts,” *Billboard*, 15 July 1978; Dick Nusser, “The Music: It’s Evolving, Changing Rapidly,” *Billboard*, 3 March 1979; Paul Grein, “Everyone’s Jumping on Disco Bandwagon,” *Billboard*, 14 April 1979.

<sup>119</sup> Androite, *Hot Stuff*, 3.

mixed with rock, big band, and many other forms of danceable music, especially in non-urban centers. Discos existed in all shapes and sizes: mostly black, mostly white, mostly gay, or mixed; discos for teens and toddlers, mobile discos, rock discos, roller discos; jeans and T-shirt, classy dress codes, formal wear; many with no cover charge, others with membership fees in the hundreds of dollars. Suburban, small-town, and somewhat esoteric markets were most lucrative for entrepreneurs looking to cash in on this newly invigorated craze: disco franchising increased, perhaps symbolized by Michael O’Harro deciding to franchise the Tramps’ name and concept in 1978; kid and teen discos grew in numbers; unique discos opened for the elderly, mentally challenged, and Christians; Washington, D.C.’s disco variety expanded to government buildings, including the Pentagon; even country music hub, Nashville, Tennessee, was slowly growing its disco profile.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, in small towns like Hinesville, Georgia, older citizens and local law enforcement feared the corruption of youth and warily welcomed the town’s first discotheque in 1978. Yet, within the year, all residents had come to embrace and frequent it.<sup>121</sup>

As increasing numbers of dancers took to the floor, the variety, profit-orientation, and commercialization that characterized disco’s first years as a mainstream craze intensified, and disco penetrated well beyond the record and club industries.<sup>122</sup> Two

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<sup>120</sup> Kornbluth, “Merchandizing Disco”; Pat Nelson, “Franchising Tricky, but Some Are Making It,” *Billboard*, 24 June 1978; “O’Harro Now Franchising Club For \$15,000 and 5%,” *Billboard*, 1 April 1978; “The Disco Phenomenon,” *20/20* episode excerpt (ABC, 18 July 1978, UCLA Film and Television Archive); “Retarded Get a Club,” *Billboard*, 2 September 1978; “Plan ‘Religious’ Calif. Club,” *Billboard*, 5 July 1980; Ed Bruske, “The Brass Don’t Boogie, Civilians Have a Ball at Pentagon Disco,” *Washington Post*, 19 June 1980; Boris Weintraub, “U.S. Govt. Invests \$750,000 into Club,” *Billboard*, 18 November 1978; Sally Hinkle, “Catching Up: That’s What Nashville Is Doing after Ignoring Disco for Years,” *Billboard*, 1 July 1978.

<sup>121</sup> Frank Madison, “Town’s Small; Music’s Big,” *Billboard*, 17 February 1979.

<sup>122</sup> “No less than 37 million Americans got out on the disco floor at least once” in 1978, according to Albert Goldman, “Disco! Hottest Trend in Entertainment,” *Life*, November 1978, 43.

hundred disco-formatted radio stations existed by 1979, and national television syndicated several disco series with disco-oriented specials airing often.<sup>123</sup> In an attempt to cash in on the craze and purportedly to teach still-uninitiated throngs about the scene, disco and dance guidebooks were published and the coverage of disco in the print media generally increased. The disco influence spread to clothing lines, children's toys, and Madison Avenue. "There is nowhere one can look without seeing some manifestation of a bread-and-disco culture," exclaimed the *New York Times Magazine*.<sup>124</sup> All of which, in turn, pushed more people to check out the discotheques for themselves.

Mass commercialization changed disco and rewrote its history. The pace of disco's growth after *Saturday Night Fever*'s success seemed to erase any understanding or acknowledgment that it had been successful with a mainstream audience well before the film's release. According to dance guide author, Ronald W. Lackmann, "The disco dance craze really began when the motion picture *Saturday Night Fever* was released in 1978." Robert Morgan, in *Record World*, also claimed that the movie's soundtrack "was the major influence in transforming disco from its black/Latin/gay roots into a solid middle-of-the-road pop music, palatable to both blue collar and middle class white America."<sup>125</sup> They both seem to have missed or forgotten about the first few years of "discomania." Even more precarious in this atmosphere was disco's connection to its

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<sup>123</sup> Orde Coombs, "WKTU, Disco 92: From Nowhere to Second in Three Months," *New York*, 23 October 1978, 66; Doug Hall, "Disco Format Cutting Swath in U.S. Radio," *Billboard*, 25 November 1978; Neil McIntyre "More Stations Block-Program Disco as Dance Music Abounds on the Air," *Record World*, 25 November 1978; Radcliffe Joe, "TV Networks Succumbing to Domestic Disco Fever," *Billboard*, 9 September 1978.

<sup>124</sup> Kornbluth, "Merchandizing Disco," 22; Darci Covergirl Doll Disco Set, commercial (1979, UCLA Film and Television Archive); Radcliffe Joe, "Ad Agencies Go Disco to Sell Product," *Billboard*, 19 August 1978.

<sup>125</sup> Ronald W. Lackmann, *Disco! Disco! Disco! A Guide to Disco Dancing* (Middletown, Conn.: Xerox Education Publications, 1980), 10; Robert Morgan, "Disco Explodes in '78-'79 (but don't forget Rock 'n' Roll)," *Record World*, 21 July 1979, 12.

roots. Commentators did not always ignore these origins (sometimes they did); both Lackmann and Morgan acknowledged that disco began with black, Latin, and gay influences.<sup>126</sup> Rather, industry promoters understood that disco had changed. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “America has popularized, merchandised, sanitized and even franchised disco.”<sup>127</sup> Franchisers admitted that “what the clubs offer is hardly disco,” but they did not want to intimidate potential clientele with “real dancers.”<sup>128</sup> For those “real dancers” who had founded the trend, this “new” disco scene was boring and standardized, a far cry from what they knew in earlier years. “Men are learning to be Travolta, women are learning to be his passive partners. . . . This wholesale buying of the model, striving for the ideal, the exact replica, is precisely what makes straight discos such a bore,” complained Virginia DeMoss in leading gay newsmagazine *The Advocate*.<sup>129</sup> For many involved, however, the commercial success of disco provided a “universal experience” where fathers, mothers, children, and grandparents, who otherwise may never have entered a disco, could come together to dance their cares away.<sup>130</sup> Disco in the mass market became a hyper-commoditized art form almost completely disconnected from its underground roots, but not without its redeeming qualities.

### **Problems of Appropriation**

As disco emerged from the underground, went mainstream and eventually rocketed into mass cultural entertainment, it was continually caught up in major condemnation and critique, especially by those groups who saw it as mainstream

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<sup>126</sup> Lackmann, *Disco! Disco! Disco!* 13.

<sup>127</sup> Alexander Auerbach, “Industry Boom: Disco Fever: Worth a Cool \$8 Billion,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 February 1979.

<sup>128</sup> Kornbluth, “Merchandizing Disco,” 22.

<sup>129</sup> DeMoss, “Disco: From High Camp to High Tech,” 29.

<sup>130</sup> Mary Elson, “It’s a DiscoFest All Day,” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 August 1979.

appropriation of their cultural expression. The critiques were present from the earliest years of disco's mainstream success and increased as that success grew to mass-market proportions. Gay men, for example, willingly took credit for the growing "discomania" of the mid-1970s, but they often regarded the straight infiltration of their discos as a problem and the straight disco scene itself as merely a subdued version of the high-energy, communal experience they had pioneered.

The sexual flexibility that attracted straights to disco was part of the larger trend of "bisexual chic" in the first half of the 1970s.<sup>131</sup> As new ideas of sexual revolution, gay liberation, and feminism challenged and changed traditional concepts of gender and sexuality, the appearance of sexual ambiguity, androgyny, and the embrace of a "gay sensibility" became not only fashionable but also commercially viable. Unisex fashions were in vogue; straight women found themselves gay male friends to take them to the chic nightspots; and men and women alike claimed an ambivalent sexuality that could swing either way. Always more about posing and the presentation of an unconventional sexuality than living it in actuality, "bisexual chic" had its most elaborate incarnation in the glam rock (aka glitter rock) stylings of musical acts like KISS, T. Rex, and David Bowie, and it became a style appropriated in many mixed discos where fashions varied "from Pierre Cardin suits to silver cosmic clothing, from Halston originals to backless halters, through all the shades, cycles and fetishes of chic, camp and queer."<sup>132</sup> Disco, in this way, served as a space in which gays and straights could challenge and confuse what

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<sup>131</sup> Two media articles of the time that mention the phrase "bisexual chic" include Van Matre, "Secure Sexuality" and Ed McCormack, "In Which a Suburban Prole Decadent Does Battle With a Hot Midtown Manhattan Discotheque," *Rolling Stone*, 28 August 1975.

<sup>132</sup> Ed McCormack, "Suburban Prole Decadent," reprinted in *Dancing Madness*, ed. Abe Peck and Suzy Rice (New York: Anchor Press, 1976), 12. For more on glam/glitter rock see Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006) and Barney Hoskyns, *Glam! Bowie, Bolan and the Glitter Rock Revolution* (New York: Pocket Books, 1998).

gender and sexuality were all about. Yet, beyond all the glitter, gayness itself seemed to have gone on sale in the urban centers of 1970s America, making hip nearly synonymous with a gay sensibility that had its downside in a commercialized version of a very real and controversial issue.

Cultural critic John Lombardi described the trend in a *Village Voice* article, entitled “Selling Gay to the Masses.” Lombardi’s two defining thoughts for 1975: “The love that dare not speak its name just won’t shut up these days” and “Just in time for the Bicentennial, gayness is up for sale.” As far as he could tell, “everywhere you look, Gay and Mass Gay are hand in hand.” He defended his claim with a long list of examples of a gay sensibility sold through popular culture, including radio shows and books devoted to the theme, towels and T-shirts at Bloomingdales inscribed with “Continental Baths,” and straights showing up at gay discos like Le Jardin, Flamingo, and 12 West. Yet, while Lombardi praised the trend, saying “gayness has lost its exclusivity and is busy becoming the dominant sensibility,” gay activist and film historian Vito Russo wrote a scathing critique of Lombardi’s piece, claiming that selling gay to the masses did nothing to solve the problems of homophobia and discrimination in society. Rather, it made the reality of gay life even more invisible by “selling a cartoon version of gay to the masses”—creating a gay sensibility that the public could buy into “without having to mention the word or confront people with the reality of the gay experience.” For Russo, straights patronizing gay discos—gay disco in general—was about making gay mean frenzied dancing and glitter; the gay owners, managers, and producers who created such a trend were looking to make money, not necessarily to instigate change.<sup>133</sup> Russo saw the potential problems

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<sup>133</sup> Lombardi, “Selling Gay to the Masses,” 10; Vito Russo, letter to the editor, *Village Voice*, 14 July 1975, 3-4. Also see Vito Russo, “Camp,” *The Advocate*, 19 May 1976.



in and limitations of a culture in which entire lifestyles could be commercialized, sold, and presented as chic.<sup>134</sup>

For many owners, managers and gay patrons, the way in which “bisexual chic” encouraged an invasion of straights into the disco scene became something of a problem that threatened their community building and watered down the high-energy disco experience. A bartender in Washington, D.C., was adamant about the situation: “You bet gays are bothered when straights start invading this place [Pier Nine] . . . We’ve got the best bars in town, places where we can do what we want, and now the straights are trying to move in.”<sup>135</sup> Owners and managers in different parts of the country also openly expressed their concerns. For example, owner of Dugan’s Bistro in Chicago, Edward “Dugan” Davison, was “surprised at how his ‘way of life’ ha[d] suddenly become bigger business,” and he maintained that by being selective in his clientele (discouraging straight men and most women), unlike the Bogart room across town, he was avoiding selling homosexuality as a commodity.<sup>136</sup> More than that, he and other managers talked about a commitment to the gay community threatened by the patronage of too many straights, especially straights who came as gawkers rather than devoted dancers. Owner of Studio One in Los Angeles, Scott Forbes, restricted his disco to gay patrons and the theater crowd because he feared that otherwise gays would no longer feel at home, which would mean they would lose the club, and Dugan commented that “Nobody bothers the ‘gay

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<sup>134</sup> Scholars have studied commercial appropriation of cultures in various contexts. See, for example, Robin D. G. Kelley, “Looking for the ‘Real’ Nigga: Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto,” in *That’s The Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), 119-136; John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture 1776-1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>135</sup> Zito, “Anything’s Cool.”

<sup>136</sup> Van Matre, “Secure Sexuality.”

pretenders,' but we're primarily gay, and we don't want straights filling the place up so our regular clientele can't get in."<sup>137</sup> One of his regular clientele was further incensed by the fact that the Bistro allowed male and female couples to win its dance contests. "The importance of the Bistro can only be diminished when it is remembered that out of six dance contests held at the Bistro, four of the winning teams were man and woman," wrote the patron.<sup>138</sup> Businessmen and dancers alike were concerned that the influx of straights into their environments would diminish the importance of a welcoming community focused on the encouragement of gay liberation.

Yet, while owners claimed that the atmosphere of community and tolerance was lost when straights started buying into bisexual chic by patronizing gay discotheques, gay discos did not always adhere to a policy of purely democratic community. Neither did they adhere to an undivided focus on dancing and completely escape any sense of discos as romantic and sexual meeting places for singles for which observers would later criticize the straight disco scene. In straight discos, there was an aura of meeting and making, which often garnered them negative comparison to the "meat market" singles bars of the 1960s. Yet, it is important to note that gay men cruised, met and hooked up in their discos also and that it was this sense of open and public sexuality as a means of sexual self-discovery that fed the mainstream disco experience. While it is true that some straight women went to gay clubs in order to avoid being harassed by men looking to "make it" with them at more conventional discos, there were plenty of gay clubs where

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<sup>137</sup> David Galligan, "The Sweet Smell of Success at Studio One," *The Advocate*, 28 July 1976, 28 and Van Matre, "Secure Sexuality." Also see Zito, "Anything's Cool"; Ribowsky, "Big Disco Dancing Boom"; and Jean Williams, "Gay Dancers Add to Excitement of Disco Boom," *Billboard*, 17 May 1975, in which the owners of discos in Washington, D.C, New York City, and the manager of Studio One, talk about the troubles of maintaining a welcoming gay community when straights begin coming to their clubs.

<sup>138</sup> Paul Perucco, "Sound Off: Is This Place Gay or Not?" *Chicago Gay Life*, 25 August 1978, 4.

the pickup scene was as hot as any straight disco or singles bar.<sup>139</sup> Many women enjoyed straight discos for exactly the same reason others preferred gay ones—they would rather find a guy to “make it” with than spend the night completely ignored by a roomful of gay men.<sup>140</sup> On the same token, there were also straight clubs, like Chicago’s BBC, which enforced no-hassle policies for “women not looking for Mr. Goodbar.”<sup>141</sup> Disco may have become “an energetic way to play the mating game,”<sup>142</sup> but to suggest that it had not served a similar function in its underground gay years or that straight, mainstream disco was somehow inferior because it involved meeting possible romantic attachments is misleading.

Moreover, the gay disco scene was caught within a paradox of desiring complete freedom and only finding that freedom by maintaining exclusive admissions policies. Even The Loft, David Mancuso’s personal party, and one of the most influential sites of the early underground disco scene, was caught in this paradox. Predominantly gay, but more about dancing than cruising, integrated in terms of race, class, and gender, his parties were held up as the epitome of democracy and communalism—“the beloved community of the 1960s protest movements but [with] pleasure beauty, and

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<sup>139</sup> Sally Helgesen, “Disco: Phosphorescent Shapes Pass through the Night, Leaving Nothing Behind,” *Harper’s*, October 1977, 21. In the mostly underground disco scene of the early 1970s, dancing may have been such a high priority and high-energy endeavor that there was little energy left for aggressive hustling of the sexual kind, but it did not exclude the possibility. Gary Catus, owner of the Third World Gallery, an underground party of disco’s early years, described his space as more than “just a pickup scene,” but he did not deny the fact that “if two people want to find each other, they will.” Jacobson, “Hollyw-o-o-o-d!” 51. The Crisco Disco, a popular afterhours gay disco in New York City, had an especially active and “high profile” pickup scene where *Night Dancin’* author, Vita Miezeitis, observed that “lots of couples neck on the couches and while dancing upstairs” (77-8). Ed Ferguson’s poem, “Disco Baby,” *Chicago Gay Life*, 29 October 1975, 15, is clear evidence that gay disco was as much about posing, sensual attraction, and the possibility of a sexual encounter as it was dancing.

<sup>140</sup> Vicki Lindner, “What Straight Women See in Gay Men,” *Cosmopolitan*, October 1975.

<sup>141</sup> People Picks & Pans, *People*, 26 June 1978, 25.

<sup>142</sup> “Enter the Disco Band,” *Time*, 6 September 1976, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,918312-2,00.html>.

connectedness as its goals rather than social justice.”<sup>143</sup> Yet, even this supposed utopia was caught in the trap of exclusivity in that the pragmatics of running a party in one’s private loft necessitated a members-only policy, making it “the jewel of ‘private parties,’ a pinnacle only a few get to reach.”<sup>144</sup> Future gay clubs would operate on similarly exclusive terms—keep out straights, keep out women, and, in cases like the Tenth Floor and Flamingo, court only the most attractive of gay men as members (muscular, butch men, who almost always happened to be white).<sup>145</sup> In their attempt to create safe, communal spaces of acceptance and freedom, gay discotheques functioned on an inherent irony that to create such a space, you had to exclude certain people. Even the owners of the Paradise Garage, who premised their investment on the goal of creating a “disco democracy” that would act as the first safe space for gay men of all skin colors, realized the inherent irony in that to create that space they had to exclude straights and women (more often than not) and implement a membership policy.<sup>146</sup>

The fact many gay discos gave memberships only to gay men, and strictly limited the number of female or straight guests, meant that gay men could openly cruise, hook up, and engage in the uninhibited sexuality that increasingly defined their political movement. However, it also meant that gay men and lesbians, especially in larger cities, partied at separate clubs and that these gay discoers separated themselves from the

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<sup>143</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 32.

<sup>144</sup> Jacobson, “Hollyw-o-o-o-d!” 50. For more on the story of The Loft see Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 31-32 and Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*.

<sup>145</sup> For more on Flamingo and Tenth Floor see Cheren, *Keep on Dancin’*; Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*; and Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*.

<sup>146</sup> For more on the exclusive policies and paradox of the gay discotheque see Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*. For more on Paradise Garage see Cheren, *Keep on Dancin’*, esp. 199-201 for discussion of irony and exclusion; and Miezig, *Night Dancin’*, 67-75.

straight society in which they were trying to gain acceptance.<sup>147</sup> As the underground gay disco scene moved into the mainstream it operated within a dual dilemma: being fans of the gay sensibility brought people to discos, but it didn't make homosexuality acceptable in larger society, and while straights seemed willing to mix with gays, gay establishments were reluctant to move beyond their desire (or need) for exclusivity and mingle socially with straights. Ultimately, because they did not engage in restrictive admission policies, the mixed clubs of mainstream disco reached the countercultural ideals of community, tolerance, individuality, and freedom to an even greater extent than those underground gay haunts said to make up the disco vanguard.

For blacks, the problems of disco's mainstream popularity centered on the issue of appropriation without proper recognition. While they felt that the disco dancing whites did was more structured than the freaking and freestyle that most African Americans preferred, many blacks believed that whites were learning and copying a rhythm and steps that blacks came to naturally.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, *Ebony* featured a cartoon in which a white "Disco King" sitting in his dressing room watching *Soul Train* cannot be bothered to come to the phone because, as his butler says to the caller, he is "creating new dance routines."<sup>149</sup> The cartoon reiterated in a humorous manner the very real sense of co-optation that blacks felt about white participation in the disco craze. Cheryl

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<sup>147</sup> Cheren, *Keep on Dancin'*, 201 and Miezitis, *Night Dancin'*, 78. Even at GLF and GAA dances, there was a tension between gay men who used the dances to flaunt their sexuality and many lesbians who felt uncomfortable in that environment. See Eisenbach, *Gay Power*, 128, 171 and Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 64. Certainly, gay exclusion of straight society or only reluctant acceptance of mixing in their clubs was not universal. At least one gay discotheque, The Second Story in Philadelphia, began courting straights with its "ultimate aim" being "to achieve a co-mingling of gays and heterosexuals." "Philly Gay Club Now Admitting Straight Patrons," *Billboard*, 22 April 1978.

<sup>148</sup> Flipping, "'Whites Capitalizing on Black Lifestyles?'" All interviewees in the *New Pittsburgh Courier* article made comments along this same theme. However, this is not to say that no blacks danced the structured form of the Hustle. After 1975, it was not unusual to see dancers on *Soul Train* doing the Hustle with their partners, even if they were surrounded by a majority of freestyle dancers.

<sup>149</sup> "Disco King" cartoon in *Ebony*, May 1979, 122.

DeSouza, writing in the *New York Amsterdam News*, also credited *Soul Train* “with much of the introduction, excitement, and phenomenal dance steps that have developed disco dancing.” She viewed the failure to include blacks in any significant manner in *Saturday Night Fever* as “exploitation based on the spin-offs where Blacks have little or no representation in the movies and merchandising industry” and expressed a very real fear and anger that “the 70’s Disco era will go down in History with little or no credit given to the Black community.”<sup>150</sup> To these African Americans, disco was just another example of “The Blackening of White America” and “Whites Capitalizing on Black Lifestyles”—another piece in a long history of black culture not appreciated until legitimated by the white masses.<sup>151</sup> While disco dances and fashions were part of this issue, the majority of black critiques were concerns about what impact disco would have on the black music industry more generally.

A mass entertainment form that seemed to dissolve boundaries of class, race, and sexuality, disco was nothing if not crossover music, which made it representative of larger trends in the 1970s music industry.<sup>152</sup> Crossover—defined by *Soul* magazine as

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<sup>150</sup> Cheryl DeSouza, “Complaint from a Disco Buff,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 23 June 1979, 19.

<sup>151</sup> Louie Robinson, “The Blackening of White America,” *Ebony*, May 1980; Flipping, “Whites Capitalizing on Black Lifestyles?” For secondary works that explore these issues of cultural co-optation in other times and cultural forms see, for example, George-Graves, “Just Like Being at the Zoo”; James Smethurst, “How I Got to Memphis: The Blues and the Study of American Culture,” in *American Popular Music: New Approaches to the Twentieth Century*, eds. Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Menick (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, (New York: Knopf, 1981); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Greg Tate, *Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003).

<sup>152</sup> For more detailed accounts of crossover in the 1970s music industry see Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*; and Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*. Certainly, disco was not the first instance of crossover in American music. For examples of earlier crossover trends see Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream*; David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Gerald Early, *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Nelson

“an artist or record that can easily move from one category to another, regardless of race”—became a central concern in the 1970s, as major labels, driven by an impetus to create music that would appeal to a wide audience and thus sell more records, increasingly dominated the music industry.<sup>153</sup> The importance of crossover meant that soul in the seventies had become “a much harder concept to pin down.” Unlike the 1960s, when “soul was simply what Blacks had, and whites did not,” crossover soul was performed by blacks *and* whites (aka blue-eyed soul).<sup>154</sup> It appeared to John Matthews, co-owner of Record and Tape Ltd. in Washington, D.C., that “soul music is getting whiter and rock music is getting a lot more r ‘n’ b influence,” and as far as he was concerned, “coming at a time when rock is in such bad shape, it offers something better to listen to.”<sup>155</sup> But for those invested in the production and distribution of soul music, crossover was a much more controversial issue. To some, crossover’s acknowledgement of black buying power, the melding of musical genres, or the possibility that the races were coming together through the fact that whites now eagerly watched black acts in concert, and vice versa, were positive trends.<sup>156</sup> For others, the very concept of whites possessing true “soul” or “funk” was a disgrace to black culture, and crossover was merely continued exploitation of black musical sounds that took profits and opportunities

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George, *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985). I will elaborate on the paradox of disco’s crossover in Chapter 4, especially in relation to black culture and concepts of masculinity.

<sup>153</sup> “Crossover Music: Marriage or a One-Night Stand?—No Racial Barriers Left in Music?” *Soul*, 11 April 1977, 2. Steve Ivory offered the following definition of crossover: “one recording from any set ‘category’ has the capability to appeal to all audiences, be they Black, white, yellow or green.” Steve Ivory, “Soul Looks Back at 1977...Music,” *Soul*, 16 January 1978, 19.

<sup>154</sup> Leonard Pitts, Jr., “Soul . . . Who’s Got It?” *Soul*, 11 April 1977, 2.

<sup>155</sup> As quoted in Zito, “Top 40 Music.”

<sup>156</sup> Patrick Salvo, “Black Funk with a White Twist,” *Sepia*, June 1976; Ivory, “Soul Looks Back”; Marilyn Fullen, “Soul . . . Who Needs It?” *Soul*, 11 April 1977; Brenda Allen, letter to the editor, *Soul*, 9 May 1977.

away from blacks.<sup>157</sup> Disco, being the ubiquitous sound of the '70s, with roots in soul music that were quickly taken up by whites, was caught up in these same trends and provided the same “mixed blessing” to black music.<sup>158</sup> Blacks had a paradoxical relationship with disco in that it helped bring black music to a wider audience and boost the careers of many black artists while simultaneously threatening to overshadow and take away from other forms of black musical expression.

Many blacks defended disco as a positive trend that promoted the careers of black artists and promised to increase society's awareness of black culture. “Discos are the best things that could happen to an artist like myself who is trying to rebuild his career. . . . For the new artist who is trying to get exposure this disco is the best avenue for their records to be heard by the masses,” said Major Lance, a gold record star of the late 1960s.<sup>159</sup> Because disco had gone mainstream, it had become a lucrative avenue for black artists and performers to introduce their music to a wide audience. Indeed, as disco's popularity grew, it helped the careers of the Trammps, Kool & the Gang, Tavares, Taste of Honey, Chic, G. Q., Peaches and Herb, and Gloria Gaynor—only a handful of the black performers who had disco to thank for their new or revived careers.<sup>160</sup> What is more, demand for disco music meant demand for songwriters, producers, promoters, and other industry-related positions that “put money in the pockets of many Blacks.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Paul Grein, “Black Radio: Racial Lines Fadeout?” *Billboard*, 30 October 1976; Ann Lewis, letter to the editor, *Soul*, 11 April 1977; Abdul Rahim Ibrahim, letter to the editor, *Soul*, 25 April 1977; Ronald E. Kisner, “White Stars Cross Over and Get Rich on Black Music,” *Jet*, 13 April 1978.

<sup>158</sup> Robert Ford Jr. and Irv Lichtman, “Disco Dampens R&B Ballad Acts,” *Billboard*, 27 January 1979; Nelson George, “The Disco Boom and Blacks,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 January 1978.

<sup>159</sup> Perew, “Disco Craze Sweeps the Country,” 16.

<sup>160</sup> Van McCoy, “Van McCoy's Music Scene,” *Sepia*, September 1978; “Will Disco Stranglehold Choke Off Black Music?” *Jet*, 10 May 1979.

<sup>161</sup> George, “The Disco Boom and Blacks”; Robert Ford Jr., “Boom Proves Boon for Blacks: Artists, Producers, Songwriters Busily Meet Demand,” *Billboard*, 14 January 1978.



Part of this effect, according to famous black radio deejay Frankie Crocker, was that disco had actually “liberated [many Black artists] from the too often confining categories of r&b or Black music,” opening up “a whole new fertile territory” for their musical expression.<sup>162</sup> And disco as crossover music meant that it opened up new territory for whites to take on traditionally black R&B expressions, which some blacks defended as a positive development. Whites taking on the stylings of soul and R&B in order to sell music for the dance floor would only improve the profit margins for black music, these defenders believed. “White acts imitating black acts will also increase sales of black product. The reason is that these white acts will make the general market even more aware of black acts,” said Jimmy Bishop, vice president and general manager of black-owned soul label Philadelphia International Records.<sup>163</sup> As more and more whites imitated the sounds of blacks to gain crossover potential in the later years of the disco boom, these profit margins did not actually materialize, but many believed as long as that imitation made for a good, danceable tune, the results could only be positive. “Music is music,” said Tom Ray of Tar Productions at the Black Music Association’s June 1979 meeting to discuss the pros and cons of disco on the black music industry.<sup>164</sup> Disco had not only “served to broaden the audience for soul music,” it held out the possibility for “greater understanding between the black and white audiences that are enjoying it [as] one of the benefits it brings to all of us.”<sup>165</sup> Certainly, there were positives for the black music industry in disco’s status as crossover music.

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<sup>162</sup> Marie Moore, “Disco Music a Boon to Artists?” *New York Amsterdam News*, 10 March 1979.

<sup>163</sup> Jean Williams, “Black Disk Upswing in 1976 Seen,” *Billboard*, 3 January 1976, 8.

<sup>164</sup> “No Agreement at BMA Meet on Disco Music’s Pros & Cons,” *Variety*, 13 June 1979, 73. Keith Adams made a similar comment three years earlier: “program director of KDIA in Oakland the Sonderling station in the Bay Area, explains, ‘For me to play the Bee Gees is no different than an RKO station playing the Ohio Players. We’re all just playing good music.’” Grein, “Black Radio,” 18.

<sup>165</sup> McCoy, “Van McCoy’s Music Scene,” 74.

While certain black music industry personnel did “not see ‘any possible conflict’ between disco and Black music,” many others did, and their concern only increased as disco became increasingly popular, its sound co-opted by the major record labels and produced specifically for profits.<sup>166</sup> Looking back musically on the year 1977, Steve Ivory, R&B music journalist and regular contributor to *Soul*, saw commerciality as one of its defining aspects: “the goal seemed to make [sic] *commercial* music, almost exclusively—not something to jell, but instead, something to sell.”<sup>167</sup> With 1977 being a banner year in the popularity of disco, the music of the nightlife was intimately mixed up in this trend, which would only become more prominent in successive years. Certain black industry workers watched and reported as the trend seemed to refute claims that disco would be a boon for black music. Instead of increasing the number of black artists who penetrated the pop music charts, disco music had actually “opened up Black stations to penetration by white artists,” calculated music critic and author on African American culture Nelson George.<sup>168</sup> Soul stations, knowing that their young black listeners—“who are increasingly assimilated into the pop culture”—would switch to other stations to hear the white disco artists they enjoyed, started programming them into their playlists in order to keep black listeners from tuning out.<sup>169</sup> This trend was especially objectionable because it kept blacks out of the massive profits available through the burgeoning disco industry they had helped pioneer. “I don’t mind what’s happened to groups like the Bee Gees,” said O’Jays member Eddie Levert, “I just wish we (Black artists) could share more equally. Black people have always liked good music. If a white act is good enough

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<sup>166</sup> “Choke Off Black Music?” 24.

<sup>167</sup> Ivory, “Soul Looks Back,” 1.

<sup>168</sup> George, “The Disco Boom and Blacks.”

<sup>169</sup> Grein, “Black Radio,” 18.

Blacks will accept them.”<sup>170</sup> He and other black artists felt that the situation was not the same in the other direction and were frustrated by the fact that black acts often faced more of a struggle to get recognition, having to make it big on the R&B charts or make platinum sales before they were accepted as legitimate pop acts. To other industry personnel, playing white acts on black radio meant abandoning the black community because “every time a white artist is played on a black station, it makes it difficult for some new black artist to get airplay.”<sup>171</sup> Disco could (and did) make a star of many a black entertainer; that it had the same result for white artists was a significant concern.

Moreover, disco’s cultural ubiquity suggested to many in the industry that black music had been redefined as such, threatening to kill other, more “authentic,” forms of black musical expression. Similar to how Vito Russo critiqued bisexual chic as turning gay into glitter and dancing rather than addressing its controversial nature, Steve Gold, manager of Far Out Productions, believed that “disco allow[ed] the white market to buy black product without making an intense identification with black music and without making the fact that it’s necessarily black a prime factor in their response.”<sup>172</sup> To him, the label “disco” was a euphemism that had helped make black music more palatable to the white record buying public, but to others, that euphemism had actually changed what black music was. As early as 1976, “some people [were] paranoid about disco music, feeling that it may be killing black music and ballads.”<sup>173</sup> This concern would peak in

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<sup>170</sup> Levert quoted in Kisner, “White Stars Cross Over,” 16. Also see Jacqueline Trescott, “The Disco Dilemma,” *Washington Post*, 5 May 1979.

<sup>171</sup> Jerry Butler quoted in “No Agreement at BMA,” 73.

<sup>172</sup> Frank Meyer, “Disco Breaking Color Barriers But Fear New Separation Trend,” *Variety*, 4 April 1979, 1, 117. Also see “No Agreement at BMA,” 73, in which Logan Westbrook, owner of Source Records is quoted saying, “Because of the racial nature of this industry, white radio said no to black artists prior to disco. Then white radio softened. They felt more comfortable about programming music if it is called disco.”

<sup>173</sup> “Producers Divulge the Tricks That Make (Hit) Treats,” *Billboard*, 7 February 1976, 26.

the spring of 1979, when the recently organized Black Music Association convened to discuss fears that “disco, which has become colorless, is eroding the profit power of other forms of Black music—rhythm and blues, and jazz.”<sup>174</sup> More than potential radio spots taken up by white disco artists, an equally pressing concern was that disco had seemingly become the only avenue through which a black artist could make a hit. With the record industry pushing disco so strongly, outlets for other black music like gospel, jazz, blues, and R&B ballads shrunk, and it seemed that any black artist looking to make a name for him/herself needed to look to disco to establish those talents.<sup>175</sup> The euphemism of disco made black music palatable to a white listening and record buying public, but many industry personnel feared that it might completely overtake other black musical forms.

Some of the most severe criticism surrounding the controversy over disco’s effect on black music had to do with the sound of the music itself. Many African Americans resented the commercialized genre of disco as a whitening of black music: “disco has caught some of its most severe criticism from certain Black observers who consider it to be rhythm and blues without the blues—the beat without the feeling.”<sup>176</sup> They especially resented the sound of Eurodisco, with its machine-made drumbeats, but the criticism was not limited to Eurodisco, nor was it expressed only by African Americans.<sup>177</sup> Magazines

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<sup>174</sup> “Choke Off Black Music?” 22. Also see Radcliffe Joe, “Assn. Fearful Disco Hurting Black Music,” *Billboard*, 7 April 1979; Robert Ford, Jr., “Black Music Assn. Delves into Problems Encountered by Race,” *Billboard*, 14 April 1979.

<sup>175</sup> Trescott, “Disco Dilemma”; Ulish Carter, “1979 Wasn’t a Great Year Musically,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 5 January 1980; David Sargent, Recordings, *Vogue*, February 1979. While many a new R&B artist did look to disco to establish him/herself, other non-disco artists actually saw disco as an asset as it helped them fill a void for those uninterested in the new sound, as Peabo Bryson explained in Ford and Lichtman, “Disco Dampens R&B,” 67. The article also talks about how strong R&B product still found a place in the market and on the charts. The pressure that non-disco artists felt to go in a disco-oriented direction was only in the minds of the performers according to LeBaron Taylor, CBS Records vice president-Black music marketing. “Choke Off Black Music?” 22.

<sup>176</sup> Boni Johnson, “Chanson: ‘Disco Is Just a Beat,’” *Soul*, 19 March 1979, 21.

<sup>177</sup> On black criticism of Eurodisco see Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 257; Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 97-98. I will elaborate further on criticisms in relation to the sound of black music in chapter 4.

traditionally geared to a white readership like *Playboy* and *Vogue* complained about disco as “mechanized funk and deracinated entertainment” whose “pulsating insistence of beat” and “rigid, simplistic formulas” had pushed venerable black artists like Al Green to abandon their soul roots and produce lower quality disco records. *Playboy* even declared that disco, which to the author “embod[ied] all the bad traits loose in the music industry and general culture,” had “helped strike the final blow against soul music” with its “dreary assembly-line music.”<sup>178</sup> While the new sound of disco was creating a genre of music that seemed colorblind and suggested ultimate acceptance and racial integration, to many it also threatened to destroy the “authentic” cultural expression of a racial community.

### **Backlash and the “Disco Sucks” Movement**

The mainstreaming and mass-marketing of an originally minority cultural form did not prevent disco from experiencing a vicious and simultaneous backlash, most vocally and demonstrably expressed by white, male rock fans. Indeed, the increased commercialization of disco only served to heighten critiques from those who remained devoted to rock as the dominant and aesthetically superior musical form. Disco irked rock fans from its earliest appearances on the pop charts because it seemed to epitomize a perceived trend in popular music privileging form over content and, as a result, producing a catalogue of music that lacked the dynamic energy, innovation, or social consciousness that were the supposed mainstays of rock.<sup>179</sup> Attention to rhythm overwhelmed any sense of music as creative art; placing all the emphasis on the beat negated any politically significant lyrical content. Unlike the album oriented rock (AOR) of the 1970s, which

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<sup>178</sup> Mark Von Lehmden, “The Year in Music,” *Playboy*, April 1978, 172, 216; Sargent, Recordings, *Vogue*.

<sup>179</sup> Tom Zito, “Pop Music Monotony: Collapsing the Traditional Esthetics,” *Washington Post*, 11 May 1975.

had become “head music”—meant to be listened to, its lyrics and guitar riffs analyzed and appreciated—disco was accused of being mindless, boring, formulaic, monotonous, and mechanical, lacking any substance in terms of lyrics or musical interest.<sup>180</sup> Its prominent and insistent beat was deemed difficult to listen to, its supposed formula and lack of meaningful lyrics an insult to the music fan’s intelligence. Moreover, rock devotees accustomed to their music serving as a soundtrack to youthful rebellion criticized disco for fostering conformity, isolation and escapism rather than creativity, community, and revolution.<sup>181</sup> To its critics, disco was “dancing music and only dancing music.”<sup>182</sup>

Yet the rock community’s complaints about disco were grounded in more than just a hatred of disco’s musical forms and aesthetics. They were equally a concern about the threat disco posed to rock’s dominance of popular music, and, as a number of scholars have previously argued, a threat to the supremacy of the white, middle-class

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<sup>180</sup> For more on rock in the 1970s, see Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Carolyn Hilary Krasnow, “The Development of Aesthetic Ideology in Popular Music: Rock and Disco in the Nineteen Seventies” (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999), esp. chp. 1; and David P. Szatmary, “Escaping into the Seventies,” in *Rockin’ in Time: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2010). I use the term AOR here to denote the rock music that had the biggest impact on the *Billboard* charts at the time and to separate it from other forms of rock in the 1970s—especially punk rock and glam rock, which maintained a sense of subcultural rebellion and did not significantly penetrate the larger mainstream. Indeed, fragmentation of the rock genre was a defining characteristic of the 1970s. See Joe Stuessy and Scott Lipscomb, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009), chps. 13 and 14.

<sup>181</sup> *Rolling Stone*, the premier rock magazine of the era, featured the strongest sentiments against disco. For examples see Correspondence, Love Letters & Advice from the following dates: 25 September 1975; 4 May 1978; and 31 May 1979. *Playboy* was also open about its hatred of disco: Von Lehmden, “The Year in Music” and Carl Philip Snyder, “The Year In Music,” *Playboy*, April 1979. Disco disapproval also appeared in publications with a more general readership. For a few select examples see Larry Rhoter, “Hideous Artificiality,” *Washington Post*, 12 June 1977; Louis A. Tarone II, letter to the editor, *Billboard*, 4 August 1979; Noe Goldwasser, “Disco Puts Radio through Changes: AOR Holds the Line,” *Record World*, 3 February 1979. Gay commentators who sensed a depreciation in the meaningful quality of their bar culture also criticized the conformity and isolation of disco. See Vito Russo, “Wanna Dance? Get Wrecked to the Ass!,” *The Advocate*, 13 August 1975; Letters to the editor from *The Advocate*, 8 March 1979; and Adam Block, “The Confessions of a Gay Rocker,” *The Advocate*, 15 April 1982.

<sup>182</sup> Bob Stein, Correspondence, Love Letters & Advice, *Rolling Stone*, 25 September 1975.

male.<sup>183</sup> That the same criticisms rockers hurled onto disco were also made of rock music, and that these criticisms were largely unfounded should be enough to prove this anxiety. AOR music, especially by the 1970s, had “sold-out” to corporate demands, and those willing to criticize described it as, “in the doldrums” and “musically derivative.”<sup>184</sup> Without denying that plenty of disco music matched those criticisms, there was enough variety within the genre to deny any sort of formula beyond a danceable 4/4 beat, and more than a few disco songs incorporated substantive lyrics. That in certain instances disco *was* replacing and overtaking rock made rockers’ anxieties a legitimate concern. After its initial commercial success in the 1950s, rock and roll enjoyed more than a decade as the leading genre in American popular music. Its sound had changed over the years, but rock had always spoken to and reverberated with the activities and concerns of American youths. By the late 1960s, into the 1970s, however, rock music experienced a creative and commercial decline. While rock continued to sell, and certain industry supporters argued that it was not affected by the disco deluge, disco outperformed rock on the charts; disco encroached on some rock radio formats; and cities like Philadelphia and Asbury Park, New Jersey (where Bruce Springsteen got his start), converted concerts and clubs from rock to disco.<sup>185</sup> As music journalist Robert Morgan wrote, “the publicity

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<sup>183</sup> Carolyn Krasnow, “Fear and Loathing in the 70s: Race, Sexuality, and Disco,” *Stanford Humanities Review* (1993): 37-45; Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 73-75; Alice Echols, “‘Shaky Ground’: Popular Music in the Disco Years,” in *Shaky Ground: The ‘60s and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and Gillian Frank, “Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May 2007): 276-306.

<sup>184</sup> Lyn Van Matre, “Sound: Rock Dreams Die, but the Variety Comes to Life,” *Chicago Tribune*, 12 September 1976; Lynn Van Matre, “Sound ’78,” *Chicago Tribune*, 7 January 1979.

<sup>185</sup> Sophia Midas, “Disco Puts Radio through Changes: Pop Fading on Top 40?” *Record World*, 3 February 1979; “Philly Abandons Rock for Disco,” *Billboard*, 30 September 1978; Maurie Orodener, “Disco Beats Its Way into Rock’s Stronghold,” *Billboard*, 21 April 1979.

that was given to disco made it appear that there was no other type of music extant.”<sup>186</sup>

Moreover, rock’s tendency to remain in its “complacent, segregating world” of traditional white masculinity meant that it no longer spoke to the concerns of a generation coming to terms with the demands of civil rights, feminism, and gay liberation.<sup>187</sup>

At the same time that disco was rapidly expanding as a mass commercial form, its detractors were making their distaste known ever more strongly, coming together in the wake of *Saturday Night Fever* to form the “Disco Sucks” movement. This anxiety-driven response of white, middle-class, male rockers to the cultural expression of African Americans, homosexuals, and women, was presented as a rejection of a mass-commercialized phenomenon and made manifest through T-shirts, buttons, rallies, and an increasing lack of tolerance for disco and what it represented. Such white male outrage came to a head in “Disco Demolition Night,” 12 July 1979, when radio announcer Steve Dahl led a Chicago baseball stadium full of fans of his rock radio show in chants of “Disco Sucks” while exploding piles of disco records halfway through a White Sox double header, flooding the field and forcing a forfeit of the second game.<sup>188</sup> It was the climax of a string of anti-disco promotional tactics heard on rock radio stations across the country, many of which had become mean and violent.<sup>189</sup> Indeed, leading up to this

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<sup>186</sup> Morgan, “Disco Explodes in ’78-’79,” 18.

<sup>187</sup> Aaron Fuchs, “The Disco Round as Rock and Roll Reality,” *Village Voice*, 5 February 1979, 51-52.

<sup>188</sup> For select coverage of the event see Random Notes, *Rolling Stone*, 23 August 1979, 34; Richard Dozer, “Sox Promotion Ends in a Mob Scene,” *Chicago Tribune*, 13 July 1979; and “Anti-Disco Rally Halts White Sox,” *New York Times*, 13 July 1979. Also see Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 232-234 and Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 375-376.

<sup>189</sup> As Frank Rose described in his contemporary analysis of “discophobia”: “In Seattle, they gathered at a fair and menaced a mobile dance floor; in Chicago, they surrounded a van full of dancing girls and chased it out of a shopping center; in Portland, Oregon, they packed the Euphoria Tavern and roared as a radio disc jockey ripped through a stack of records with a chain saw; and in Denver, Detroit, Norfolk, San Jose, and dozens of other cities, they cheered as the alien beat was obliterated by the sound of bombs exploding, elephants stampeding, people puking, or a needle being ground into vinyl.” Rose also points out that radio-consulting firm Burkhart/Abrams encouraged many of these promotional campaigns, but the activities had



infamous demonstration of disco discontent, the most vocal of the backlash contingent became virulently abstract in their discrimination against disco. Letter writers to *Rolling Stone* stopped offering reasons for why disco sucked; it was enough to chastise the magazine for giving any substantive coverage to the genre at all. In response to an April 1977 issue covering the disco craze, 377 readers wrote in to tell *Rolling Stone* their thoughts. Those letters published were almost exclusively by men and along the lines of that written by Rick Festi of Dover, Ohio: “Disco fever, *bah!* I’d rather have malaria.”<sup>190</sup> Dahl himself was vocal and absolute in his disgust for the genre, telling reporters that he *hated* disco—the music and the lifestyle—scratching and smashing disco records on the air, and recruiting his “disco destruction army” to throw marshmallows with the words “disco sucks” at the Village People during their Chicago concert in June 1979.<sup>191</sup> As popular as disco was with a broad American public, its growth had precipitated a reassertion of the white rocker’s sense of entitlement and superiority, not to mention lack of tolerance.

As a result of this backlash, the entertainment industry of the early 1980s saw the fading of a craze (as crazes are prone to do). But the much touted “death of disco” is more accurately understood as the evolution of a cultural form under a new name—“dance music”—rather than an absolute dissolution. The most immediate effect of accumulating anti-disco sentiment was the tainting of the term “disco,” especially in its correlation with the formulaic disco sound that glutted the market to the point of

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gone beyond what the firm antipated. See Rose, “Discophobia: Rock & Roll Fights Back,” *Village Voice*, 12 November 1979, 36.

<sup>190</sup> Correspondence, Love Letters & Advice, *Rolling Stone*, 31 May 1979, 7. Similar comments were made after a feature on Donna Summer a year earlier: Marc Shepardson, Correspondence, Love Letters & Advice, *Rolling Stone*, 4 May 1978, 6.

<sup>191</sup> Random Notes, *Rolling Stone*, 23 August 1979.

saturation. As the media declared “disco” a dirty word and disparaged the most recognizable symbols of commercial disco culture, radio stations reverted to rock as quickly as they had transitioned to disco months earlier, and major record labels reassessed their commitment to production, promotion, and distribution of disco product.<sup>192</sup> According to the *Wall Street Journal*, by the Fall of 1979, “at least one-third of the converts to all-disco radio [had] dropped the disco format altogether and 50% to 60% of the rest [had] modified it,” while Warner Brothers and RSO Records converted their disco-music departments to dance-music departments, “signing groups that play any form of music, just so long as it is danceable.”<sup>193</sup> At the end of 1980, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “Disco certainly declined in popularity this year. Six of the 10 records on Billboard magazine’s list of best-selling singles in 1979 were disco-oriented. That number dropped to one hard-core disco effort this year.”<sup>194</sup> The readily recognizable formula of a 4/4 beat, 120-plus beats-per-minute, swooping blends of horns and strings, and incessant high-hat with minimalist lyrics—the easily reproducible 1970s disco sound that the rock contingent most strongly attacked—no longer held the disproportionate share of the music market that it had held for the last few years of the 1970s.

But the general decline of formula disco and the tainting of those images, songs, and symbols of the commercial craze, in no way ushered in disco’s death. In the wake of

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<sup>192</sup> For reports on these trends, see the Discos department of *Billboard*, 1978 and 1979.

<sup>193</sup> Earl C. Gottschalk Jr., “Disco-Music Craze Seems to Be Fading; Record Makers Glad,” *Wall Street Journal*, 22 October 1979.

<sup>194</sup> Robert Hilburn, “1980: Disco Slips, Country Rises,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 December 1980. The article did not specifically name the “hard-core” disco effort referred to, but it most likely was in reference to “Funky Town” by Lipps Inc. which reached number one on both the Hot 100 and the Dance charts. Twelve months earlier, in January of 1980, the newspaper already noted a disco decline, saying, “True, disco has declined. Last spring there were usually six or eight disco singles in the Top 10 and a swarm of them in the Top 100. These days there are only one or two in the Top 10 and maybe 15-20 in the Top 100.” See Dennis Hunt, Pop Music, “Disco in ’79: The Beat Goes Down,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 January 1980. That it referenced a decline at both ends of the year suggests that disco’s demise was only a gradual and incomplete one rather than the sudden “death” the media suggested and that pervades popular memory.

backlash, disco defenders adamantly asserted that their music encompassed all danceable music, and that the disco sound itself was becoming fusion music, incorporating strands of jazz, pop, R&B, and especially rock.<sup>195</sup> The few recognizable disco acts that survived the backlash did so because their music was not formula, and Donna Summer, in particular, had major hits with strong rock elements. Along the same vein, much new rock music in the late 1970s and early 1980s took on a danceable quality as it incorporated elements of the disco sound, and groups like Blondie and Queen had major hits on the disco charts and dance floors with the fusion. Both the disco and rock contingents took up “New Wave” music as their own, and the trend cast doubt on the supposed polarity between the two genres. Many listeners and dancers still preferred a purer form of disco music, but rock, pop, R&B, even country increasingly dominated the disco dance scene, as did danceable blends of the disparate elements of these genres in various combinations.<sup>196</sup> The disco industry happily claimed this musical fusion as representative of how their business had evolved over time, believing the trend would mean better quality music played in the discotheques rather than the glut of mostly mediocre material the record labels provided DJs with at the height of the disco boom.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> “Forum Attendees Unite, Vow to Aid Disco,” *Billboard*, 23 February 1980; Colin E. Hammond, “Give Us Back Our Name!” *Billboard*, 15 March 1980; “‘It’s Simple Dance Music,’ Enthusiasts Agree: Panel Declares It Alive and Well,” *Billboard*, 22 March 1980; Radcliffe Joe, “Perspective on the ‘80s,” *Billboard International Disco Sourcebook*, 7 June 1980; Joseph E. Bates, “Setting the Record Straight,” *Billboard*, April 26, 1980.

<sup>196</sup> Ralph William Unger, letter to the editor, *Billboard*, 19 April 1980 and “Ohioans Nix Rock, Says Larry Pim,” *Billboard*, 19 April 1980, reported that certain listeners and disco patrons did not appreciate the record labels forcing new wave and rock into their scene. Yet *Billboard*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Record World* much more frequently reported on the fusion of musical sounds and genres in discotheques, as part of disco record pools, and on the radio, most often when discussing whether disco had actually died. Such reporting is most prevalent in *Billboard* from the fall of 1979 through the summer of 1980. For a selection of other examples, see “Disco Boom May be Over,” *Rolling Stone*, 1 November 1979; Brian Chin, “Is Dance Music on the Wane? Disco Partisans Vow They’ll Survive,” *Record World*, 17 November 1979; Steven Blauner, “Rock-Disco Fusion on the Rise,” *Record World*, 15 September 1979; Brian Chin, Disco File, *Record World*, 12 July 1980; Brian Chin, “Queen Rules Dance Floor, Airwaves,” *Record World*, 30 August 1980.

<sup>197</sup> Bates, “Setting the Record Straight”; Joe, *This Business of Disco*, 99.

And while the industry chose to use the “dance music” label instead of the tainted label of “disco,” the genre had never been so simply confined to the formula sound that rockers so harshly criticized, especially not in the years before *Saturday Night Fever*. Indeed, the insistence that disco incorporated all danceable music merely brought the industry full circle, back to the innovation and variety that had helped make dancing to recorded music a popular pastime in the first place.

Disco’s supposed “death” is even less supported when considering the aspect of dancing. As *Record World* reported late in 1980, “‘Disco radio’ formats may be extinct, but Americans certainly haven’t stopped dancing.”<sup>198</sup> Many of the most established discos of the era closed in the first years of the new decade, as did smaller venues in cities and towns across the country, but this had as much to do with a leveling off of the disco boom as it did with any sort of death trope. With the disco name being pulled through the mud or generally avoided in the mass media and the “new” dance music holding a more proportionate share of the market alongside a multitude of other genres, the ready-made advertising for clubs and dancing through disco-oriented radio formats, television shows, movies, and books had mostly disappeared causing a natural drop in discotheque attendance.<sup>199</sup> 1981 was the first year since 1976 that *Billboard* did not host at least one International Disco Forum (renamed the previous year to the International Dance Music Forum), suggesting that dancing as *the* nightlife entertainment no longer attempted to swallow everyone in its wake as the disco deluge had in the 1970s. But dancing remained a popular activity well into the 1980s, as reported in various news

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<sup>198</sup> Phil Dimauro, “Dance Clubs Are Influencing Radio, But Do They Help Break Pop Hits?” *Record World*, 29 November 1980, 11. Also see R.A. Wilson, “Meanwhile, On The Radio . . .,” *Soul*, April 1980.

<sup>199</sup> See, for example, Dennis Hunt, “Disco Clubs: Down But Not Out,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 April 1980. As a symbolic blow to 1970s mainstream disco, Michael O’Harro’s Tramps closed in January 1982. See Stephanie Mansfield, “Death of a Disco,” *Washington Post*, 4 January 1982.

sources.<sup>200</sup> The clubs featured less formula disco of the 1970s kind and instead included programming that, according to *Los Angeles Times* entertainment journalist Thomas K. Arnold, “reflects the industry as a whole: balance of different styles of music.”<sup>201</sup> Yet, this variety of musical programming characterized many disco clubs even at the height of the craze and dominance of formula disco, especially in America’s heartland.<sup>202</sup>

The essence of disco was alive and well in the entertainment and music industries even at a time when the mass media declared it dead. Yet, to argue against the common declaration of disco’s “death” is not to deny the reality of a disco backlash and its long-term significance in shaping how Americans in the 1980s and future generations conceptualized and remembered the disco phenomenon of the 1970s. Indeed, when the *Los Angeles Times* talked about the popularity of dancing to recorded music at the end of 1982, and *Time* magazine reported on a “revival” of rock music and dance clubs in the summer of 1983, both included statements that disassociated the current dance trends with those of the previous disco era. *Time* discussed how “the dead discos have been displaced” and quoted Arista Records President Clive Davis as saying, “Disco’s out . . . but dancing isn’t”; the *Los Angeles Times* reported that many club owners “hesitate[d] to

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<sup>200</sup> See, for example, Jose, “Reports of Disco’s Demise is News to Crowds at N.Y. Spot,” *Variety*, 2 July 1980, 2; Radcliffe Joe, “2001 Clubs Holding Their Own,” *Billboard*, 6 September 1980; Radcliffe Joe, “Disco Thriving in Heart of America,” *Billboard*, 30 August 1980; Hunt, Pop Music, “Disco in ’79”; Brian Chin, “Dance Clubs Outlive ‘Death’ of Disco,” *Record World*, 26 September 1981; Thomas K. Arnold, Pop Music, “Music Has Faded, But Idea Lives: Disco Returns from Dead,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 December 1982; Lynn Langway with Julia Reed, “Flashdance, Flashfashions,” *Newsweek*, 4 July 1983, 55; J.D. Reed, “New Rock on a Red-Hot Roll,” *Time*, 18 July 1983, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,950986,00.html>; Sherri Gilman-Tompkins, “Where to Step Out When You Just Gotta Dance,” Weekend Tempo, *Chicago Tribune*, 9 September 1983; and Cathleen McGuian, et. al., “Breaking Out: America Goes Dancing,” *Newsweek*, 2 July 1984.

<sup>201</sup> Thomas K. Arnold, Pop Music, “Music Has Faded, But Idea Lives: Disco Returns from Dead,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 December 1982.

<sup>202</sup> As evidenced by Jonathan E. Horton, “Letters to the Editor,” *Billboard*, 12 August 1978, 6 and Radcliffe A. Joe. *This Business of Disco*. New York: Billboard Books, 1980, 25-6.

use the word ‘disco’ even to describe [their] new nightclubs.”<sup>203</sup> The whole of mainstream disco at the height of the 1970s craze was as varied as the dance music and culture that “replaced” disco in the 1980s, but disco’s detractors failed to recognize that complexity, instead creating and attacking a simple, monotonous, and inconsequentially commercial culture of mindless decadence with which few wanted to associate. Thus, as the awkward introductory conversations about my research show, 1970s disco became tainted and misunderstood in ways that endured for at least two decades.

## **Conclusion**

While it is important to understand why this backlash occurred and what those impulses can tell us about American society at the dawn of the Reagan era, the vocal outcry that so contaminated 1970s disco lasted only a couple of years, even as its influence lasted for many more. Disco’s mainstream popularity, on the other hand, had managed to outweigh its constant detractors for more than half a decade, and its varied influences and complexities continue to shape American popular music and society into the new century. As I will discuss in my conclusion, the aesthetic, ideological, and cultural influences of disco lived on in American society and music just as much as the industry did under its new name of dance music. For that reason, it is just as important to understand why disco was so popular with such a broad spectrum of people. Moreover, to understand disco as a mainstream entertainment form we must examine it along this timeline, from 1974 through the early 1980s, and in all of its complexity—exploring how its initial boom years built off the impulses of its roots in gay and black culture and how those impulses continued into its later years. Fragments of these impulses remained as

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<sup>203</sup> Arnold, Pop Music, “Music Has Faded”; J.D. Reed, “New Rock on a Red-Hot Roll,” *Time*, 18 July 1983, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,950986,00.html>.

the craze boomed, even if overshadowed by the commercialization and mass marketing that overwhelmed the industry with the success of *Saturday Night Fever*. In some ways, *Saturday Night Fever* was the beginning of the end of disco as an entertainment activity that tried to bring an underground activity and minority cultural expression to the masses. In other ways, disco always retained a connection to its roots because the ideologies behind them—civil rights, sexual freedom, and liberation—had become more commonplace in American society.

It is the goal of the following chapters to explore the ways in which these ideologies manifested themselves in mainstream disco—how they were celebrated, challenged, and redefined—especially in terms of how gender and sexuality were being redefined in a society coming to terms with the social change movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Mainstream disco was a complex and contradictory business that people at the time often recognized as such, even if we today seem to have forgotten. I hope to use gender and sexuality as a way to bring these complexities back into our disco discourse. As Barry Cunningham put it for the readers of *Cosmopolitan* in 1978, “From superchic to down-and-dirty, the new disco scene positively pulses with contradictions. It’s sexy and androgynous, as often glamorous as grungy, as primitive as drumbeats and as sophisticated as laser-beam technology. So dance along with us as we explore the bewitching paradoxes behind the big beat.”<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Barry Cunningham, “Discorama,” 223.

## Chapter 2

### **“It’s Good for Us to Experience New Things”: The Representation of Gender and Sexual Roles in Fictionalized Disco**

By late 1977, disco had become a pastime for a large cross-section of the American public and was about to expand even further as a variety of different media forms took advantage of its popularity. Disco appeared on television as early as 1975, with local cable series (often syndicated to various parts of the country) highlighting disco music and teaching dance steps. Over the next years, it gained national television exposure with specials on shows such as *Merv Griffin*, *Dinah*, and *Midnight Express*, and in the latter years of the decade, disco appeared as a central plot element in sitcoms such as *Family* and *Starsky and Hutch*.<sup>1</sup> As disco grew into a phenomenon, it became the setting and narrative basis of community theater productions, children’s stories, novels, even a dismal failure of a Broadway show. Most prominent in this disco deluge were two movies: *Saturday Night Fever* and *Thank God It’s Friday*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the fictional depictions of disco mentioned above appeared after these two films had succeeded in making disco a lucrative topic around which to base a story. In this chapter, I choose to take the genre of film, these two films in particular, as representative of how fictionalized stories with disco as their setting or central subject matter represented gender and

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Zwick, “Disco Queen,” *Family*, draft of script (dated 25 October 1978) and “Discomania,” *Starsky and Hutch*, UCLA Film and Television Archive, directed by Arthur Marks (ABC, original airdate 12 September 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Contrary to popular belief, the number of disco films produced during the craze was small. *Saturday Night Fever* (SNF) and *Thank God It’s Friday* (TGIF) were the only two to make significant box office draw and press coverage.



sexuality, suggesting standards for how men and women involved in the disco craze might comport themselves and playing a role in the disco's growth.

*Saturday Night Fever* and *Thank God It's Friday* were two very different disco films. One, released in December 1977, was a dark and serious drama that emphasized the lives of working-class youths. The other, released five months later, was a bright and cheery comedy of errors that glamorized the disco scene—what one critic described as “a celebration (as opposed to a study) of the Disco monster that's currently giving America the same magnitude of shakeup that Godzilla gave poor Japan.”<sup>3</sup> Differences of tone aside, as the two most popular (or at least most aggressively marketed) disco films of the era, they work well together to break down the representations of gender found in various disco stories. The films are as much about the interactions of men and women in the new and confusing gender landscape of the 1970s as they are about disco itself. Moreover, these films primarily portray the confusion over changing gender and sexual roles as part of a disco scene largely disconnected from its underground roots. There were small nods to the gay, black and Latin origins of disco, but the films tended to prioritize the emerging popularity of suburban, mainstream, and straight disco rather than its urban, subcultural, and gay forebear. They created, as Tim Lawrence so aptly describes, “a lens through which a discotheque mainstream could come into focus.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet, while Lawrence gives credit to movies like *Saturday Night Fever* and *Thank God It's Friday* for their role in creating a disco phenomenon that engulfed the mainstream, he discounts the disco experience depicted in the films precisely because it

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard Pitts, Jr., “T.G.I.F.: All God's Children Got Rhythm,” *Soul*, 24 April 1978, 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 307.

was the template for mainstream commercial disco. Even as he quotes local DJs who “were generally satisfied with the veracity of RSO’s depiction of the Brooklyn scene,” he goes on to enumerate the ways in which *Saturday Night Fever* was not the “authentic” disco experience of its early gay and black underground club network.<sup>5</sup> According to Lawrence, “Decontextualized and dehistoricized, disco culture was presented as a monolithic and acceptable dating agency for straights, and for the consumers of *Saturday Night Fever* who knew no better, or who perhaps didn’t want to know any better, the dance floor in Bay Ridge became the founding moment of ‘discomania.’”<sup>6</sup> Peter Shapiro, in his history of disco, also discounts the *Saturday Night Fever* version of disco as “inauthentic.” He endows it with enough importance to call it “the biggest disco artifact of them all” and to claim it as having “more popular culture impact than any movie since *Gone With the Wind*,” but the grand majority of his discussion of the film involves outing Nik Cohn, who had only recently arrived in New York, as having fabricated the original article on which the film was based and, thus, the movie as being a better representation of Northern Soul and British Mod youth culture than disco in the United States. Ultimately, according to Shapiro, *Saturday Night Fever* was “‘disco’ only in quotation marks.”<sup>7</sup> *Thank God It’s Friday* garnered even less discussion from both authors because it “brimmed with nightlife clichés” and was generally panned by the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 305-307.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 202-205. Quote from 202.

critics.<sup>8</sup> Neither scholar takes the time to analyze the gender conventions of the films in any capacity.<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter, I am less concerned with the “authenticity” of the disco experience as portrayed in disco films and more concerned with the ways in which these movies, ostensibly about disco, were essentially stories of gender and sexual relations with disco as their setting. Whether or not the depiction of disco in the films is accurate, they came to represent in the minds of millions what they might expect the disco experience to be like. And the ways in which the characters comported themselves as men and women and conducted their sexual relations—both in and outside the disco—described for audiences the varied ways in which a generation was approaching and dealing with new and confusing standards of gender and sexuality and what role disco had in helping them work through this confusion. I explore the representations of gender and sexuality in disco films in relation to the historical context of an era in which American society was coming to terms with concepts of feminism, liberation, and individual human potential.

I begin with a short discussion of the ways in which the Robert Stigwood Organization (RSO) and Casablanca Records and Filmworks produced *Saturday Night Fever* and *Thank God It's Friday* as disco films that exploited and promoted disco as a mainstream entertainment form, placing the films within the category of mainstream by separating their depictions from the gay and black roots of the disco craze—

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<sup>8</sup> Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 308. *TGIF* is not mentioned in Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson analyze *SNF* as a story of “escape from subculture” and as paradigmatic of “intellectual” critiques of subculture as escape. Carolyn Krasnow uses *SNF* to bolster her argument that disco was criticized as a working class form. These authors also fail to offer a gender analysis of the film. See Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture, and the Politics of Sound* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7-12 and Krasnow, “The Development of Aesthetic Ideology in Popular Music: Rock and Disco in the Nineteen Seventies,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999), 74-75.

acknowledging Lawrence's critique, but taking the convention seriously as a tool in disco's popularity. I then move on to my film analyses, which are separated into a section on masculinity and another on femininity only as a helpful organizing principle—the representations of each were intimately interrelated. Each analysis begins with a brief set-up of the cultural context of confused and changing gender conventions in the wake of feminist and liberation movements, focused around their impact on understandings of male and female sexuality in an era of sexual freedom. From there, I provide my reading of the films and the ways in which their stories are illustrative of the era in which they were produced. I end each analysis with a short discussion of how a collection of reviewers received the gender and sexual representations in varied and conflicting ways, further underlining the films as expressions of a confused gender landscape. As an attempt to explain why disco expanded so dramatically at the time of their release, a concluding discussion explores how viewers consumed the films.

Despite—indeed, because of—the way *Saturday Night Fever* has come to overwhelm understandings of disco culture, it stands as a significant artifact of its specific moment in history and, perhaps surprisingly, a complex depiction of 1970s gender conventions that deserves extended analysis. Examining it next to a film of contrasting intention and tone puts into relief just how conventional *Saturday Night Fever* was in its treatment of gender during the late 1970s. These fictional accounts of the disco world offered a picture from which people formed ideas of its conventions and standards. Disco films, however, were about more than just disco; they helped teach audiences about the range of new and possible gender and sexual roles in a society changed by sexual revolution and feminism. In general, I argue, the films depicted disco culture as

one in which casual sex and sexual freedom were the norm, but not necessarily the praised ideal—characters represented varied and sometimes challenging concepts of gender and sexual relations, but the depiction of more “traditional” ideals often kept in check such changing gender conventions. The overwhelming ambiguity of both the depictions themselves and reviewers’ responses to them is fitting expression of an era of confusion and uncertainty.

### **Production and Promotion: Disco Films as Decidedly Mainstream**

*Billboard* first announced RSO’s intent to produce *Saturday Night Fever* (then entitled *Saturday Night*) in November 1976, reporting on “what is believed to be the first full-length feature movie based on the impact of the discotheques on the contemporary culture of the U.S.”<sup>10</sup> The film also presented an opportunity to bring more exposure to the recently revived career of the Bee Gees, represented by RSO Records, who recruited them to write and perform most of the music for the soundtrack. Directed by John Badham and written by Norman Wexler who based his screenplay on a loose interpretation of a 1976 *New York* magazine piece written by Nik Cohn, *Saturday Night Fever* tells the story of the youths who populate a disco in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn.<sup>11</sup> Kevin McCormick, the executive producer, did not envision it as merely a disco film; he described it as “an in-depth character study that related the problems of today’s kids.”<sup>12</sup> The main character, Tony Manero, played by up-and-coming star John Travolta, works at a paint store during the days and is leader of the local gang, the “Faces,” and king of the neighborhood disco, 2001 Odyssey, in the evenings. As Tim Lawrence has noted, “the

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<sup>10</sup> “Stigwood Disco Movie,” *Billboard*, 20 November 1976.

<sup>11</sup> Nik Cohn, “Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night,” *New York*, 7 June 1976.

<sup>12</sup> Laurie Werner, “Disco Flicks,” *Daily News* (New York), 25 December 1977.

introduction of a female love interest had been [Norman] Wexler's most significant revision to Cohn's unerringly homosocial story," and much of the film revolves around Tony's interactions with two main female characters—Annette, Tony's former dance partner who is infatuated with him, and Stephanie, a newcomer to 2001 who becomes Tony's new dance partner and introduces him to the possibilities of life outside of Bay Ridge.<sup>13</sup> The inclusion of these storylines in the film offers a unique perspective on popular portrayals of gender relations in the late 1970s.

In *Thank God It's Friday*, love and male-female interaction are the central plot devices in a film that is a wild romp through a disco evening, following several sets of characters through various antics in the Los Angeles disco, the Zoo.<sup>14</sup> First announced by *Billboard* in January 1977, *Thank God It's Friday* was a joint venture by two record companies—Casablanca and Motown—distributed by Columbia Pictures.<sup>15</sup> The director conceived of the film as “a comedy of recognition” in which he felt the comedic aspects of the “hang-ups, fears, insecurities” one sees in him/herself would be displayed onscreen, and the producers, including Casablanca president Neil Bogart as executive producer, “promise[d] that it will show the funny, glamorous side of the night life, unlike the gritty desperation of ‘Saturday Night Fever.’”<sup>16</sup> Bogart did not screen the movie for

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<sup>13</sup> Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 305. It is not true that Cohn's story is devoid of women, however. A character parallel to that of Annette appears in the story. It is the fact that the character on whom Tony is based is generally unaware of and unconcerned about her love for him that retains its homosocial essence.

<sup>14</sup> There is some discrepancy concerning the former name of the disco that served as the set for *TGIF*. *Billboard* reported it as “the former Cabaret disco,” while Larry Harris remembers it as Osko's. Both cite La Cienega Boulevard and that the disco had been recently renovated for \$100,000. See “Bogart Denies Sale of Casablanca Scam,” *Billboard*, 30 July 1977 and Larry Harris with Curt Gooch and Jeff Suhs, *And Party Every Day: The Inside Story of Casablanca Records* (New York: Backbeat Books, 2009), 212.

<sup>15</sup> “3 Firms Collaborate on ‘Disco’ Movie,” *Billboard*, 22 January 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Viola Hegyi Swisher, “‘TGIF’-SRO!,” *After Dark*, May 1978, 49, and Werner, “Disco Flicks.”

critics, admitting, “This is definitely *not* a critics’ film.”<sup>17</sup> It featured a collection of little-known actors and was the directorial debut of Robert Klane, but served as a showcase for the artists of Casablanca and Motown with Donna Summer in a key role as the aspiring disco diva Nicole Sims and the Commodores as the live entertainment for the disco dance contest. According to former Casablanca Vice President, Larry Harris, “If that sounds like an expensive and lengthy commercial . . . that’s exactly what it was.”<sup>18</sup>

Both films also had large promotional and marketing campaigns behind them, which helped peddle the films and their soundtracks to a wide audience. In support of *Thank God It’s Friday*, Casablanca spent nearly a million more on promotion than it did on producing the film.<sup>19</sup> Their campaign included advance release of the multi-record soundtrack, which featured artists from both Casablanca and Motown; television shows, including two TGIF-themed episodes of the *Merv Griffin Show*; radio spots; newspaper ads; and videocassettes of the film trailer sent to retailers across the country.<sup>20</sup> In backing *Saturday Night Fever*, RSO undertook its “most extensive marketing and promotion program” up to that point.<sup>21</sup> The campaign kicked off in September 1977, with a preview trailer played in 1,500 theaters nationwide and 8,000 posters mailed to retail outlets and cinemas. RSO followed those strategies in late November and early December with the release of the soundtrack and four key singles along with a longer trailer, point-of-purchase displays, and videotape playback machines installed in record stores to play the

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<sup>17</sup> Bogart quoted in Ben Fong-Torres, “‘Friday’: Disco Drone on Film,” *Rolling Stone*, 13 July 1978, 11. Fong-Torres quotes Bogart from the *San Francisco Examiner*, but considering there exist no reviews of the film prior to its release date, I believe it an accurate claim.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, *And Party Every Day*, 212.

<sup>19</sup> The exact figures are uncertain. Larry Harris claims they spent \$2 million to promote a \$1 million film; *Rolling Stone* reported that Casablanca spent “a reported \$3 million to promote a \$2.2 million film.” See Harris, *And Party Every Day*, 213 and Fong-Torres, “Disco Drone on Film,” 11.

<sup>20</sup> John Sippel, “Casablanca Sinking \$1 Mil into ‘Friday’ Album Promo,” *Billboard*, 22 April 1978.

<sup>21</sup> “RSO Releases Four Singles from ‘Saturday Night Fever,’” *Record World*, 3 December 1977 and “RSO’s Biggest Campaign Ever for Its ‘Saturday’ Soundtrack,” *Billboard*, 10 December 1977.

trailer and Bee Gees concert footage. In January 1978, the three million dollar promotion program continued with a paperback book version of the screenplay, T-shirts, cigarette lighters, mirrors, decals, songbooks, and an hour-long television special of the Los Angeles premier.<sup>22</sup> More than a year after the film's initial theatrical release, *Saturday Night Fever* returned to theaters with a PG version, which had already been playing on airplanes.<sup>23</sup> Chairman of Paramount (the film's distributing company), Barry Diller, explained the re-release in the following terms: "we felt a lot of people who would enjoy the film were excluded from seeing it. Why shouldn't we let them see it and make ourselves some money? Young people knew and responded to the music."<sup>24</sup> Lacking the offensive language and crude sex, the PG version of *Saturday Night Fever* was blatantly about making profits off the appeal of disco by packaging an otherwise dark story in a way that would reach as wide an audience as possible.

As dark and "realistic" as its producers intended *Saturday Night Fever* to be in its portrayal of working-class youths, the disco experience depicted was always an attempt to exploit the burgeoning popularity of mainstream disco, rather than to portray the gay and black dance culture that originally fed the craze. And as different as *Saturday Night Fever* and *Thank God It's Friday* were in their portrayals, the representations of gender and sexuality in each were reflective of how they spoke to the mainstream, rather than subcultural, experience of disco. Above all, these films presented disco as a heterosexual scene meant for meeting and making with the opposite sex. As scholar Jeff Yanc has argued, in *Saturday Night Fever* there is an exaggerated attempt at depicting a

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<sup>22</sup> "\$3 Mil Promo for 'Fever' Film," *Billboard*, 14 January 1978.

<sup>23</sup> Aljean Harmetz, "'Fever' Redone for PG Rating," *New York Times*, 11 January 1979; Gene Siskel, "'Saturday Night Fever' Is Cooled Down for PG Release," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 February 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Diller quoted in Harmetz, "'Fever' Redone for PG Rating."



heterosexual world, especially heterosexual masculinity.<sup>25</sup> Not only do Tony Manero and his male friends frequently make reference to casual sex and their sexual conquests; the movie also includes a gang rape and other explicit sex scenes in the back of the car Tony and his friends share. 2001 Odyssey is even connected to a strip club, where a topless woman dances on the bar. As film analyst William Kelly put it, “[Tony and his friends] are the self-styled ‘Faces,’ men of force and power who successfully compete for women and attention, the fruits of disco labor.”<sup>26</sup> Most of the women of 2001 are also out on the prowl for casual sex and heterosocial mingling. At one point Annette comes prepared with her own stash of condoms in her desperate attempt to make Tony fall in love with her—getting him to sleep with her being, in her mind, the logical first step. *Saturday Night Fever* even goes so far as to disavow any connection between disco and gay life by including a scene where Tony’s friends shout insults at a cross-dressing couple who walk across the basketball court, suggesting the Faces would never approve of gay men in 2001 Odyssey.

While *Saturday Night Fever* depicted disco as so thoroughly heterosexual as to correlate it with homophobia, *Thank God It’s Friday* fit a trend in other fictional depictions of disco, which acknowledged the homosexual role but overshadowed it with more dominant plot lines. For example, an episode of the television series *Starsky and Hutch* that incorporated a disco storyline included a reference to homosexuality laced

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<sup>25</sup> Jeff Yanc, “‘More Than a Woman’: Music, Masculinity, and Male Spectacle in *Saturday Night Fever* and *Staying Alive*,” *Velvet Light Trap* 39, no. 12 (Fall 1996). He ascribes this tendency to the producer’s attempt to achieve mass audience appeal.

<sup>26</sup> William Kelly, “More Than a Woman: Myth and Mediation in *Saturday Night Fever*,” *Journal of American Culture* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 242.

with humor.<sup>27</sup> In *Thank God It's Friday*, there are snippets where a man cuts in on a male-female couple to dance with the man and a transvestite is shown shaving his chest in the bathroom as Frannie and Jeannie, underage teenage girls, sneak in through the window to participate in the dance contest. Ultimately, however, these homosexual references played a relatively insignificant role in the film's overall depiction of sexual relations, and they did not phase the movie's straight audiences, as evidenced by a pre-release study conducted by Kenn Friedman of Casablanca. Friedman showed a short segment of the film to select audiences in several cities because "Bogart was worried that straight Americans would be offended if they detected the goings-on in the background of one sequence on the tape: two men were dancing together and sniffing amyl nitrate."<sup>28</sup> As it turned out, after interviewing "hundreds of people" and showing it "to thousands," Friedman claimed, "as far as I know not one straight person ever saw the men dancing, even after I showed the segment to them two or three times."<sup>29</sup> After nearly four years of exposure to disco as a mainstream entertainment form and months of *Saturday Night Fever* topping the box office, straight America had come to understand disco as its own to the point that it could ignore or deem irrelevant the presence of gay men in the disco

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<sup>27</sup> Starsky and Hutch go around the disco asking for information on the two male suspects in the multiple-murder case they are trying to solve. The woman offering them information, Judith, quips, "If you fellas are so interested in guys, you're in the wrong club" to which Starsky and Hutch can only respond by giving each other confused and embarrassed looks. Clearly, that club was meant for straight singles looking for a good time, as Judith had previously asked both Starsky and Hutch to dance. "Discomania," *Starsky and Hutch*. Also, *Disco Inferno*, a novel that fictionalized the discotheque industry, loosely (although somewhat transparently) based on the mystique of Studio 54, had a central character described as having "an eclectic, if not downright omnivorous sexual appetite." However, when considering that this novel highlighted the more dangerous and suspicious aspects of the disco industry with a strong backdrop of the disco sucks movement (which ultimately wins out at the end of the novel), its acknowledgment of varied sexual preferences is not necessarily a positive reference. Porter Bibb, *Disco Inferno: An Illustrated Novel* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1979), 21.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Kopkind, "The Dialectic of Disco: Gay Music Goes Straight," *Village Voice*, 12 February 1979, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Friedman quoted in *Ibid.*

scene. By acknowledging and celebrating only the parts relevant to them, mainstream disco fans reinforced in their minds the idea that disco was about straight singles meeting, dancing, and making out. *Thanks God It's Friday* director, Robert Klane, even admitted that setting the movie in a disco was largely a measure of convenience: "The disco is strictly background to tell the stories against. A place where people go to meet, connect, score. If they're lucky, they'll meet the right person and never have to come back."<sup>30</sup> In the movies, the disco was a heterosexual meeting place, akin to the singles bar.

*Saturday Night Fever's* depiction of disco's heterosexuality goes so far as to make explicit connections between Tony's dancing and his sexuality. A woman at the disco, Connie, asks him to dance using the line, "are you as good in bed as you are on that dance floor?"<sup>31</sup> Connie makes a direct connection between Tony's dancing and his sexuality, suggesting that his dancing talents should transfer to his sexual abilities, making him desirable and masculine. Similarly, Tony's response to Connie, "You know, Connie, if you're as good in bed as you are on the dance floor, then you're one lousy fuck," makes a similar connection between dancing and female sexuality. In an era when it was accepted—some would say expected—that a woman be sexually free, her ability to dance enhanced her femininity because it suggested sexual openness, making her more desirable. Over the course of the movie, as Tony rejects Annette on multiple levels, this connection is reinforced. Not only does he refuse to sleep with her; he also dumps her as his dance partner for the contest in favor of Stephanie, explaining, "It's professional, you know what I mean? It's like, things like this happen when it's professional." Yet, if

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Swisher, "'TGIF'-SRO!" 49.

<sup>31</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all *SNF* quotes taken from *Saturday Night Fever*, DVD 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Collector's Edition, directed by John Badham (1977, Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2007).

dance and sexuality are connected for women as they are for men, this partnership decision is also motivated by the fact that Stephanie's dancing makes her more desirably feminine, that Annette's dancing skills do not reinforce her femininity enough to make her sexually attractive (or at least not as attractive as Stephanie).

Beyond the clear prioritizing of heterosexuality, there is also a racial element to these disco films. *Saturday Night Fever* is not timid about the inclusion of racial slurs, the fact that Puerto Ricans are villains to the Italians, or that blacks are insignificant, almost nonexistent, in the world of 2001 Odyssey. It is a racist world where whites like Tony and Stephanie appropriate black and Latin dance moves and win a dance contest based on the color of their skin. (Despite the producer's addition of a moralizing element in Tony's refusal of the prize, the racism stands out.) Interestingly, however, it is a crucial detail of the film that Tony and his friends are white ethnics, Italians able to pass for white relative to the other ethnics in Bay Ridge (i.e. Puerto Ricans), but not on equal footing with the middle-class WASPs of Manhattan or the famous forerunner in the dance movie business, Fred Astaire.<sup>32</sup> In her review of the movie, emerging film scholar Marsha Kinder commented, "Travolta's stylization is a lot more explicitly sexual than Astaire's, which may be related to Tony's ethnic identity."<sup>33</sup> Without elaborating further, Kinder seems to suggest that Tony's ethnicity acts as a mediator between the historically sexualized dancing of America's non-white populations and the appropriation of this culture by white America. The appropriation of black dance moves and music is certainly not without precedent as a similar process occurred with the crazes of ragtime

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<sup>32</sup> For compelling discussions of the relation between ethnicity and "whiteness" see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) and Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Marsha Kinder, Review of *Saturday Night Fever*, *Film Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 40.

and swing, as well as in rock ‘n’ roll with the scandalized dance moves of Elvis Presley. The fact that Tony’s sexually explicit hip shakes and gyrations gained such popularity with relatively little controversy not only speaks to the widespread influence of the sexual revolution; it also suggests that the appropriation of Tony’s sexual moves in an attempt to be masculine like him—or a desire to be feminine like Stephanie—was perhaps more appropriate to conservative “Middle America” than the direct adaptation of black culture.

Interestingly, in *Thank God It’s Friday*, where disco dancing actually plays less of a central role except in the form of a brief dance contest that all the action leads up to, dancing is much more about freedom than sex. And the person who wins the contest and teaches the characters his philosophy of “Dance! Everything else is bullshit,” is Latino Marv Gomez.<sup>34</sup> His role in the film is an implicit acknowledgement of disco’s Latin roots, similar to how the black band and DJ acknowledge its black roots, while the main players on the disco dance floor are all white. Marv even wins the contest with a young white woman as his partner. The racism is less blatant than that of *Saturday Night Fever*, but there is still a sense of ethnic mediation in disco’s appropriation. Disco was already popular with a white urban population and white artists had released disco singles well before the release of these disco movies, but the films minimized disco’s connections to black music and culture to such an extent that conservative Americans who had otherwise avoided the disco trend could now enjoy it without much thought to its racial roots.

While this ethnic mediation is an important part of how disco films made the often

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<sup>34</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all *TGIF* quotes taken from *Thank God It’s Friday*, videocassette, directed by Robert Klane (1978, Culver City, CA: Columbia Tristar Home Video, 1997). Marv Gomez is the only character who gets a solo dance number: “A singular bright spot occurs when one of the characters, ‘Leather’ Marv Gomez (Chic Vennera), a disco dancer modeled on John Travolta’s Tony Manero, goes into an impromptu dance on top of a half-dozen automobiles parked in the Zoo’s lot.” Gene Siskel, “After ‘Saturday,’ ‘Friday’ is Just a Dismal Disco Film,” *Chicago Tribune*, 7 June 1978.

explicit sexuality of disco dance and music more palatable to otherwise hesitant audience members, more important is how the representations of gender and sexuality in the films worked within a historical context filled with confusion concerning these roles.

In presenting a disco culture that was decidedly mainstream in its ability to appeal to heterosexual and white audiences, disco films also presented themes related to a society whose gender ideals and sexual expectations were in flux. In disco, men and women of all backgrounds could explore sexual self-understandings that were as varied as disco culture itself, a direct result of the ways sexual revolution and the increasing commercialization of sexuality had combined to disrupt and confuse traditional understandings of sexual relations over the past decade. The infiltration of countercultural mores and human potential in 1970s society included the notion that sex was a source of personal meaning, a quest that marriage could no longer be expected to fulfill, but the new morality spawned from the sexual revolution had mixed results. As the media bombarded consumers with messages that their sexual dreams could be fulfilled with the purchase of yet another commodity and that everyone around them was having more and better sex, in casual encounters, with multiple orgasms, many were left feeling that if they chose not to partake of this culture, they were missing out and somehow odd. There were fears that such open and explicit discussion combined with a sexualized media and culture only served to increase performance expectations and put pressure on both men and women to conform to a culture of casual sex and to exaggerate their sexual success, enjoyment, and prowess. Others, bemoaning the increased

acknowledgement of casual sex, felt that the new permissiveness made it harder, if not impossible, to nurture meaningful relationships grounded in love and emotion.<sup>35</sup>

In the mid-1970s, the print media attempted to debunk the myth that a commitment to sexual freedom necessitated casual sex with multiple partners, the most inventive techniques, and mind-blowing climaxes. On the one hand, articles about sex in the 1970s referred to a sexualized culture that increased sexual expectations and took the emotions out of sex. Those same articles, however, made explicit efforts to prove this not to be the case—showing that many men and women still conformed to conservative understandings of sex as part of loving, if not marital, relations and purporting the idea that sex should be about personal choice, defined by each man and woman individually or through honest discussion with his or her partner. In 1976, *Cosmopolitan* discussed how modern society, lacking a fixed social concept of pleasure or promiscuity, allowed people to define promiscuity for themselves: “one’s definition of sexual promiscuity depends pretty much upon who is doing the defining.”<sup>36</sup> In this way, the ideologies and values of the 1960s lived on in the 1970s, not merely through lax moral standards but also through the quest for personal understanding unbound by societal strictures, gender stereotypes, or cultural expectations—finding self-fulfillment by defining sex on individual terms and exercising the freedom to say either yes or no.<sup>37</sup> In the late 1970s

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<sup>35</sup> Popular media sentiments that discuss the positive and negative results of the new morality come from a variety of sources including a survey of the following magazines from the decade: *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, *Essence*, *Ebony*, and *Ms.* Also see Estelle Freedman and John D’Emilio, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982), 24-25.

<sup>36</sup> Irma Kurtz, “What’s Promiscuous Now?” *Cosmopolitan*, April 1976, 108.

<sup>37</sup> In many ways, this alleged culture of casual, meaningless sex appeared to be truth. Indeed, there was belief on both sides that casual sex was the norm and expectation, as evidenced in a *Redbook* article on single men: “If you think most men want to go to bed with you on the first date, you’re right. ‘A woman expects to be propositioned on the first date,’ said Michael. ‘If I don’t try, I may be insulting her.’ Says

and 1980s, conservative sentiments against permissiveness and in favor of monogamous, meaningful relationships were becoming more frequent and dominant. Yet, up until the very end of the 1970s, they were always in dialogue with a contingent of people who supported casual sex as one means to personal fulfillment. The mid- to late-1970s were a confused time in the sexual scheme of things. In the debates over appropriate sexual expression and attempts to debunk the hyper-sexualized atmosphere as myth, the print media opened possibilities for true freedom through completely individualized and personal definitions of sexuality. In the 1970s, obligatory orgasm was out and personal definitions of pleasure were in, making it a moment of possibility in which casual sex with strangers, serial monogamy, open marriages, and the “new chastity,” all coexisted as equally promising forms of sexual freedom.<sup>38</sup>

### **Masculinity and the Movies**

Moreover, the ways in which feminism reshaped, challenged, and provoked debate over these newly sanctioned forms of sexual freedom were significant for both men and women in and outside organized liberation movements, as evidenced in disco films. On the surface, *Saturday Night Fever* projects a working-class masculinity that is rough and misogynist, a femininity that is desperate and subservient—gender roles untouched by the influence of feminism. On closer examination, however, the film challenges stereotypes of “traditional” gender constructions in both visual and narrative means by including characters that represent a variety of gender roles and sexual

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Larry: ‘If a woman is interested, why postpone the inevitable?’” See Elin Schoen, “What Women Should Know About Single Men,” *Redbook*, November 1976, 204. Yet, letters to the editor show that as late as 1979, the obligation to say yes dominated the American imagination, but that to have both options available was the ideal situation. See L.P., Dear Cosmo, “The Chaste Choice,” *Cosmopolitan*, April 1979, 374.

<sup>38</sup> Also see Steven Seidman, “Eros Unbound: Constructing Sex as an Autonomous Domain of Pleasure,” in *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 121-156.



proclivities and by coming to few definitive conclusions about the superiority of any singular gender prescriptions. *Thank God It's Friday* depicted similar critiques and ambiguity in how it represented gender and sexuality in the disco era, and did so with a solidly middle-class setting and cast of characters. In doing so, the two films highlighted the changes and confusions in gender and sexual roles of the 1970s, a decade in which all members of American society were coming to terms with the movements and demands for change of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The range of ways in which men responded to the demands of and changes precipitated by women's liberation was what these films tried to work through and represent on the screen.

*Searching for a Synthesis: The Historical Context of a Changing Masculinity*

The ways in which feminism redefined gender roles and sexual pleasure for women meant that traditional ideals of masculinity were under siege in the 1970s. Cultural historian Michael Kimmel describes the “Masculine Mystique” as “that impossible synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero” that, like Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* for women, defined an ideal by which dominant culture determined a man’s success or failure at “proper” manhood.<sup>39</sup> In the postwar, anti-communist atmosphere of the 1950s and early 1960s, this ideal manifested itself in a societal preoccupation with tough, macho masculinity—defined as stoic, aggressive, domineering, virile, and in control (of oneself as well as others)—well-represented and admired in popular culture through figures as assorted as John Wayne, James Bond, and Hugh Hefner. Sensitive emotions were forbidden this self-made man and could be expressed only through the female in his

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<sup>39</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 173. See below for discussion of Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*.

life—he was not to cry, display weakness, nor need affection. He and his male peers defined his sexuality by virility and conquest, performance over pleasure—getting and penetrating a woman (the more often the better) was the ultimate sexual definition of one’s masculinity. At the very least, a sexual double standard excused, sometimes encouraged, sexual aggression and exploitation on the part of men while blaming women if things got out of hand. Above all, men were to avoid being “feminine” and, by extension, avoid being homosexual. Such traits made up a normalizing stereotype that in itself was complicated, contradictory, and often challenged in lived reality, but macho masculinity was an ideal manhood set up by dominant society for men to achieve, and a generation of men had sought to prove it in a range of ways and to varying extents of success.<sup>40</sup> When the New Left and counterculture of the 1960s began to criticize the self-made mold as stifling and alienating and feminists in the 1970s began to question the very origins and validity of such categories as “feminine” and “masculine,” men found their macho ideals unexpectedly in crisis. Feminism and other notions of liberation in the

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<sup>40</sup> Traits of macho masculinity in the post-war era extracted from a variety of sources: Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2001); Kimmel, *Manhood in America*; Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth, and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001); Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); Rupert Wilkinson, *American Tough: The Tough-Guy Tradition and American Character* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Books, 1983); and Mirra Komarovsky, *Dilemmas of Masculinity: A Study of College Youth* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976). Also see Pete Hamill, “A Farewell to Machismo,” *Cosmopolitan*, April 1976; and “All About Men” *Redbook*, April 1979, which featured selections from *Men: A Book for Women* by James Wagnvoord and Peyton Bailey. A category like masculinity is not simple or singular. Most of these books acknowledge a dominant ideal of masculinity (described above) while exploring a variety of “masculinities” that existed in reality and representation in various eras and based on factors such as race and class, upon which these books elaborate to an extent I cannot here. I choose to use “macho” as a general defining aspect of traditional masculine ideals in the years before second-wave feminism when male dominance over women often went unquestioned as a part of societal gender conventions. It was with second-wave feminism that “macho” ideals came under critical and broadly influential scrutiny, causing the term to garner a negative connotation of *overly* domineering, virile, etc. I also choose to use the term “machoism” instead of machismo to separate a white and black macho from that which is unique to Latin cultures. “Machoism” was also a term used by the Village People during the disco era.

1970s demanded that men reconsider their macho proclivities and interrogate the basis of masculine privilege. The ways men dealt with this challenge were multiple.

Men's responses oscillated between feelings of threatened masculinity, a complete rejection of women's liberation as a valuable movement, and open welcoming of change. One of the most notable ways in which white men responded to the influx of feminism in society was through a self-conscious "men's movement," which took on multiple forms and dealt with a variety of issues. Building on New Left ideas for a manhood that opposed the alienation of the "organization man" and was open to the capacity for self-awareness and love (as well as social justice) and dovetailing with women's liberation and the human potential movement, men's liberation provided a supportive environment in which to begin addressing and challenging dominant norms of masculinity through the open expression of emotion, empathy and love. In addition, a slew of therapeutic and academic writings explored the damages of trying to achieve the ideals of manhood and the benefits of becoming more liberated and sensitive, of embracing one's feminine side as part of living one's full potential as a human being. Men's liberation was distinctly profeminist and sympathetic to other movements for social justice and equality, taking cues from radical feminism in eschewing a biological definition of gender traits and trying to re-envision a humanity that was open to new and indeterminate identities. Men's rights, on the other hand, expressed an anger at feminism and women, which tended to emphasize the ways in which men were supposedly victims—of discrimination in family law, of feminism that took away their power and control while giving women special favor, of the guilt feminism bestowed on them, of "antimale sexism." Men's rights shared with men's liberation "a focus upon the way in

which men were limited or damaged by the ‘male role,’” but the two strands of the men’s movement perceived these limitations and damages quite differently.<sup>41</sup>

While significant in their attempts to deal with feminist demands for change, only a small portion of the population was officially involved in the organized men’s movement even as all men had to come to terms with the changing and uncertain gender expectations of the time. Most men were neither strictly for nor strictly against, but rather deeply conflicted and confused about, what feminism was asking of them.<sup>42</sup> Such confusion was especially apparent when considered in the atmosphere of professed sexual freedom of the 1970s, in which many men saw feminism as merely a chance for more sex, rather than a mandate to rethink their masculine approach to sexuality or sexual partners.<sup>43</sup> Many others were unwilling to give up the conquest-oriented nature of masculine sexuality and were disturbed by the ways sexual freedom loosened the sexual double standard and took away masculine control. If the combination of feminism and sexual revolution meant more women were forward and aggressive about their sexuality and pursuit of sexual pleasure—capable of depersonalizing their sexuality and treating men as sex objects the way men had historically approached women—not all men were

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<sup>41</sup> Judith Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men’s Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 190. For more on the “men’s movement” also Schulman, *The Seventies*, 177-179, 182-185; Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 185-188, 200-202; and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Hearts of Men*, 117-143.

<sup>42</sup> As indicated by an extensive Gallup Survey: “The findings . . . indicate that American men have changed far more in a few years than any historian or sociologist would have supposed possible. Yet the findings are also filled with inconsistencies and contradictions, and for good reason. Though there clearly is a new breed of male, he is still in transition, and is clinging to a number of attitudes and ways of acting that have been part of the male pattern for many centuries.” See Morton Hunt, “Special: Today’s Man: Redbook’s Exclusive Gallup Survey on the Emerging Male,” *Redbook*, October 1976, 112. Also see Komarovsky, *Dilemmas of Masculinity*.

<sup>43</sup> The notion that feminism meant more sex is best expressed by Evil Knievel and Bobby Riggs as quoted in Robert Kerwin, “Women’s Lib and Me,” *Playboy*, May 1978, 102. Whether or not the sentiments are true, their collection in a magazine read almost exclusively by men suggests that the idea of masculinity being measured, in part, in relation to a competition of sexual conquests remained alive and well in the late 1970s for these men.

comfortable with or attracted by this development.<sup>44</sup> Other men had come to accept, even enjoy, the idea of sexually assertive women, but they still felt disconcerted by a loss of control, especially when confronted with the possibility that they might not be the only man with whom a woman was sleeping.<sup>45</sup> The double standard may have been breaking down in practice, but it continued to linger in the collective understanding of gender roles, and men were especially sensitive to its effects on their concept of themselves as men. Moreover, as women became insistent about their right to sexual pleasure, men felt a new pressure to perform, which engendered fear in many men, impotency in some.<sup>46</sup> Pleasing their partners sexually had become “part of our culture’s definition of the male sexual role,” and while some men approached this concern as a chance to showcase their sexual prowess, others interpreted this new demand, combined with the culture’s general preoccupation with sex, as undue pressure to perform and meet unrealistic expectations.<sup>47</sup> Nervous about their abilities to meet new demands, men became unsettled by their loss of power in relationships.

Still for other men, the ways in which feminism forced them to rethink the assumed nature of male and female sexuality was a welcome respite from traditional masculine expectations. While the new sexual atmosphere was uncertain for most men

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<sup>44</sup> See for example, Carol Tavis, “40,000 Men Tell about Their Sexual Behavior, Their Fantasies, Their Ideal Women and Their Wives,” *Redbook*, February 1978 and Ross Wetzsteon, “Do Men Want to Be Sex Objects?” *Village Voice*, 1 November 1976. Some men found the shift in power relations so unsettling that they chose celibacy rather than face continued blows their male ego, as reported in Paul Solomon, “The New Chastity,” *Cosmopolitan*, January 1979, 159.

<sup>45</sup> This concept is best expressed in Harry Stein, “Spending the Night at Her Place,” *Esquire*, 1 March 1978.

<sup>46</sup> In the 1970s, some men blamed new demands from women for impotency. But, as *Redbook* reported in 1978, it was a myth that the Women’s Movement had caused “a wave of impotence washing over the land.” In fact, “Only 1 per cent of the men surveyed say they have been frequently impotent over the last year, and only 9 per cent say the direct effects of the Women’s Movement have been negative.” See Carol Tavis, “The Sex Lives of Happy Men: Part Two of Redbook’s Startling New Report,” *Redbook*, March 1978, 199.

<sup>47</sup> Quote from Lorna and Philip Sarrel, “What Men Need from the Women Who Love Them,” *Redbook*, April 1977, 262. Also see Tavis, “40,000 Men Tell.”

and women, the opinion that sex should continue to be about masculine conquest and control was a minority one. Most men found it exciting when women took the sexual initiative, and most eagerly sought to satisfy women's new sexual needs as part of a give and take relationship that was attempting to make its way toward equality. Many men desired to engage in a variety of (hetero)sexual roles and activities, sought validation for their emotional nature within a society that defended individuality and human potential, and wanted to be able to choose when to be aggressive or vulnerable in sexual relations. The combination of sexual and women's liberation made it increasingly acceptable for men to express these desires—for individual men and the popular press to acknowledge that men and women both approached sex along lines of a continuum from passive to aggressive. And as gender roles were redefined in the sexually free atmosphere of the 1970s, it became clear that many more men were devoted to loving, sensitive, and monogamous sexual relationships than the masculine myth and sexual double standard ever suggested.<sup>48</sup> Men, like women, desired a sexual freedom that would allow them to define sex on emotional terms and within meaningful relationships—even the freedom to practice chastity—if they so chose.

Yet the old constructions of masculinity remained, and in the 1970s, most men were heavily engaged in a search ultimately to find something of a synthesis between macho and effeminate, between hard and soft, stoic and emotional, aggressive and passive.<sup>49</sup> No matter the new commitment to female satisfaction, men were reluctant to

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<sup>48</sup> For a few examples see *Ibid.*; Lorna and Philip Sarrel, "What Men Need"; Anthony Pietropinto, M.D. and Jacqueline Simenauer, "Beyond the Male Myth," *Cosmopolitan*, April 1978; Tavis, "The Sex Lives of Happy Men"; Barry N. Spodak, "The Sound and the Fury," "Your Place," *Esquire*, 28 March 1978; and Komarovsky, *Dilemmas of Masculinity*.

<sup>49</sup> This was the general idea of the mythopoetic men's movement that became most popular in the 1990s. See Schulman, *The Seventies*, 183-184 and Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers*.

relinquish their performative-based notions of sexual masculinity and unwilling to give up completely on older ideals. They were, instead, searching for some form of compromise in order to understand the new sexual landscape. In the 1970s, liberated women encouraged men to cultivate a synthesis of macho and emotional—men could be sensitive while still being strong, could relinquish dominance without becoming completely passive—and most men also wanted to find this compromise.<sup>50</sup> It is this ideal of masculine/feminine synthesis—along with the poles from which it is drawn—that we need to emphasize and explore in order to understand masculinity in the 1970s. It is also a masculinity best expressed in disco culture and represented in disco films like *Saturday Night Fever* and *Thank God It's Friday*.

#### Synthesis and Cinematic Critique

As cultural critic Barbara Ehrenreich has noted, *Saturday Night Fever* locates “traditional” masculinity in the working-class, depicting it as excessively macho, unrefined, even primitive, and uses its stereotyped, exaggerated representation as a critique of “traditional” masculinity that can be transformed through upward mobility.<sup>51</sup> Yet, as cultural scholar Alice Echols has pointed out, the film’s critique of masculinity is not limited to the working-class confines of Bay Ridge, as it marks out the economically mobile characters and setting of Manhattan as similarly fraught with compromises, uncertainty, and close-minded men.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the viewer is not privy to the success or failure of the two main characters in their transition to Manhattan and “refined” gender

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Tavis, “The Sex Lives of Happy Men,” 198 and Ruthanne Roome, Dear Cosmo, *Cosmopolitan*, June 1977, 278.

<sup>51</sup> Ehrenreich, *Hearts of Men*, 136-140.

<sup>52</sup> Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 190-191. Echols notes Stephanie’s former boyfriend, who we meet briefly in the film: “he is smug and censorious. . . . this scene underscores powerfully and poignantly that the terminal trendiness of swinging Manhattan can be as parochial and close-minded in its way as the customs and conventions of Bay Ridge.”

identities, making its statement at best ambiguous about the changing confines of gender in the 1970s.

Most centrally, Tony Manero is an interesting amalgam of traditional masculinity and new, more relaxed constructions of what it meant to be male in a liberated era. As Jeff Yanc argues in his essay, “‘More Than a Woman’: Music, Masculinity, and Male Spectacle in *Saturday Night Fever* and *Staying Alive*,” *Saturday Night Fever* presents a balancing act in which Tony is feminized through the objectification of his body, but where he also presents an active and narcissistic masculinity. For example, as the camera pans up and down Tony’s body during his famous opening strut down a Brooklyn street, this objectification is countered by the “smug narcissism” of checking out his reflection in store windows and staring at and harassing women who pass, which “connotes a strong, confident masculinity” and emphasizes his heterosexuality. In the same vein, Tony’s body is eroticized as he gets ready for a night at the disco but simultaneously masculinized through a burst of physical activity in the form of martial arts movements. Beyond the visual objectification of his body, however, Tony portrays a new, “softer,” version of masculinity simply through his attention to style and fashion and the fact that he defines his identity through the traditionally female-dominated activity of dance. The explicit connection between dance and sexuality—Tony’s dancing is a display of his masculine virility—and an aggressive masculinity presented through violence and misogyny counter these feminine-identified characteristics. This balance, between feminine objectification and active masculinity, allows Tony to “illuminate the possibility



of fluidity in culturally restrictive gender roles” and represents a complex construction of masculinity during an era of redefinition in gender ideals.<sup>53</sup>

As the main character in the movie, star of the show, and ambiguous hero who we are to believe finds his way out of Bay Ridge, Tony is set up as the model of masculinity to be emulated in *Saturday Night Fever*. His masculinity is brash, narcissistic, and fashion-conscious, as well as active, pursuant, and in a leadership role, especially in comparison to his friends. Tony’s future may still be uncertain at the close of the film, but the producers clearly praise his leadership role and active pursuit of something beyond the dead-end life he lives in Bay Ridge above that of the dependant and fearful masculinity of his friends, as symbolized by the “punishment” of Bobby C. who falls to his death off the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. Bobby C.’s masculinity is weak and passive. He has gotten his girlfriend pregnant and finds himself confined to the possibility of an unwelcome marriage when she refuses to get an abortion. “I’m paralyzed; I got no more control,” he tells Tony, his loss of control contributing to his feminization. Moreover, Bobby C. is weak, avoiding fighting when the Faces go after the Barracudas, and dependent on Tony, crying over the fact that Tony did not call him to help solve his predicament. Unlike Tony, Bobby C. has failed in finding a proper balance between feminization and active masculinity and will never be rewarded with life outside Bay Ridge. Tony’s other friends, in comparison, will not find their own way out of Bay Ridge until they develop an independent masculinity—one that does not rely on Tony’s

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<sup>53</sup> I draw the quotes in this paragraph from Yanc, “More Than a Woman,” to which my discussion is indebted. Such an analysis of Travolta’s objectification helps complicate the theory of the male gaze as put forth by Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18. For further discussion of this kind of male objectification see Kenneth Mackinnon, *Uneasy Pleasures: The Male as Erotic Object* (London: Cygnus Arts, 1997), and on discomfort with masculine display also see Steve Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema,” *Screen* 24, no. 6 (November-December 1983): 2-19.

leadership—that also finds the proper synthesis between their misogynist, excessive machoism and the more emotionally attuned, fluid gender we are to believe Tony finds.

More than serving as a foil to his group of friends because of his desire for something beyond mere existence and survival in Bay Ridge, the sexual education Tony experiences over the course of the film serves to complicate ideas of male sexual privilege and misogyny that had dominated before the challenge of feminism. Casual sex in the back seat of a car, most disturbingly in the form of a gang bang, is how the Faces of 2001 Odyssey put their sexuality into practice. Easy sex with easy women, love a nonexistent part of the equation, is one way these men demonstrate their virile masculinity. Tony, before his sexual education through his relationship with Stephanie, shares these expectations: “You make it with some of dese chicks, dey tink you gotta *dance* with’em,” Tony complains.<sup>54</sup> Sex is sex for Tony some twenty-two minutes into the film; dancing or other entanglements that women try to connect to it are superfluous and inconvenient in his mind. There is, however, something different about Tony’s approach to sex, which we see in his various interactions with Annette. Tony refuses to go through with intercourse when he finds out Annette is not “fixed”; he still refuses sex with her when she comes prepared with her own condoms and later chastises her for the desperation that results in her being raped by Tony’s friends. Sex never seemed to be an end in itself in Tony’s mind, and by this latter point in the film, Tony has learned that there can be more to such relations than just an easy lay. He proceeds to turn his back on his sexually exploitative friends.

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted with vernacular in Movie, *Playboy*, March 1978, 33.

A pivotal moment in Tony's sexual education occurs just before this gang rape, leading to an ending that offers an expanded and more complicated notion of masculine sexuality than the traditional image that dominates even *Saturday Night Fever's* story. Tony tries to make it with Stephanie, seemingly as consolation after a disappointing and disturbing conclusion to the disco dance contest, and when Stephanie refuses him, he calls her a "cock tease" and forces himself on her. When she responds to his physical and verbal violence with violence of her own (kneeing him in the crotch), his masculine sense of sexual privilege is challenged. Tony returns to his less enlightened gang of friends only to experience further emotional confusion and turmoil with the rape of Annette and death of Bobby C. After a night of riding around on empty subway lines, Tony goes to Stephanie in Manhattan and announces that he cannot return to Bay Ridge. The life he knows there is no longer acceptable to him, but can he "be friends with a woman?" Stephanie asks. Only friends. "A new relationship, different from the sexual coupling Tony offered the evening before, and one impossible to consider in Bay Ridge, is suggested here," writes Kelly.<sup>55</sup> And though the audience is not privy to how well Tony fares at this new kind of relationship, they are led to believe that a friendship with Stephanie, devoid of sex and based on respect, is desirable while his misogynist and exploitative friends are left to rot in Bay Ridge.

Stephanie's unconventional approach to gender relations confuses Tony and forces him to find an uncertain compromise between his traditional understandings of masculinity and those of a new era. John Travolta himself claimed that he took Tony Manero's "male-chauvinist thing" from the men he interacted with in the real-life 2001

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<sup>55</sup> Kelly, "More Than a Woman," 246.

Odyssey, but he also explained his character's more evolved attitude in an interview with *Playboy*: "The thing about Tony is that you know he has a sensitivity at a higher level. There is potential there for a tasteful, tactful man. If he falls in love with someone he isn't likely to say, 'Hey, give me a blow job, just suck my cock'" (whereas his friends probably would be).<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, Tony embraces a more modern and respectful approach to sex and heterosexual relations that builds on the ideas of sexual and women's liberation, and the film preaches that this approach is more rewarding than his friends' traditional notion of male sexual privilege and female sexual objectification.

This complication of masculine sexual privilege is also presented in other disco movies of the era, and in some ways even more noticeably. In Kustom Production, Inc.'s 1978 movie *Disco Fever*, for example, the main male characters represent two very different kinds of masculine sexuality.<sup>57</sup> Richie Desmond, a washed up rock and roll teen-idol (ironically played by Fabian, himself an ex teen-idol from the 1950s era), represents the more enlightened sexual male, refusing the sexual advances of Cybil Michaels, the discotheque owner who promises to revitalize his music career, by saying, "The only entertainment I provide for you is music." Richie falls in love with Jill, a woman he invites to the disco to aid in her escape from an abusive boyfriend, before sleeping with her. In contrast, Richie's PR man, Brian Parker uses the disco as a place to meet women only for casual sex and one-night stands. But while Richie's courtship of Jill is presented in a sentimental tone as a successful and respectful relationship, Brian's sexual escapades are included as comic relief as he is shot down and unable to score with

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<sup>56</sup> Travolta quoted in Tom Burke, "Struttin' His Stuff," *Rolling Stone*, 15 June 1978, 77 and *Playboy* Interview: John Travolta, *Playboy*, December 1978, 124.

<sup>57</sup> *Disco Fever*, Library of Congress, VBH0207, directed by Lamar Card, (USA: Group 1 International, 1978).

woman after woman. Brian attempts to prove his masculinity through sexual conquests, whereas Richie wants to prove his through professional success rather than sexual exploitation of women. If viewers hadn't already picked out the hero in this story, the fact that Richie's masculinity is set up as the one to be emulated is underscored in the end when Richie makes a splash during his performance at the launch of Cybil's newest club even as he defies his contract with Cybil and plays his new material rather than discoized versions of his old hits. Brian, on the other hand, becomes the enemy when he betrays Richie and signs on as PR man in Cybil's devious plan to use Richie only as an opening act to break her newest star, Tommy Aspen (a plan which ultimately fails when Tommy realizes what's going on and walks out). The film presents two different kinds of masculinity and masculine sexuality, but it is clear which one is praised above the other.

Similarly, *Thank God It's Friday* presents multiple versions of masculine sexuality while critiquing the concept of male sexual privilege. At one extreme sits Tony Di Marco, owner of the Zoo, and a womanizer who likes to flaunt his wealth and confidence in a nice car and Travolta-like three-piece suit. The character's main storyline is in trying to make it with Sue, a married woman who convinces her husband to go to the club on their anniversary. After staying close to his side all night in defiance of her husband's carousing with a young woman, Sue ultimately rejects Tony's offer to take her home with the line, "I know what you're about. I have eyes and a brain." Tony may be adored by many of the women in the club, but Sue can see through his act and bruises his ego with rejection. To add to his embarrassment, Tony's car gets hit so many times in the parking lot as a running joke throughout the film that it falls to pieces at the end.

Tony Di Marco's attempt to exploit a married woman for casual sex is not presented as the kind of man viewers should want to be like.

Then there are Ken and Carl, two geeks out for a night on the town. Carl is out looking for some "action," but Ken says, "You don't understand. I don't want the action; I'm not looking for action. What I want is a nice girl." To which Carl responds, "Me too. One nice girl. Nice tits, nice ass, nice." To Carl, women are only hot bodies and sexual objects to be used for his pleasure. Ken wants to see beyond a woman's body and find a girl with a nice personality, one who is not out looking for casual sex but looking for an emotional connection as he is. When Carl ends up locked in the stairwell in a fumbling mistake to get his sweater after a woman invites him to her apartment, it is a clue that his approach to women and sex is not meant to be rewarded. Ken, on the other hand, ends up meeting Jennifer who came to the Zoo, with her friend Maddy, wanting to meet "just one nice guy." They are rewarded in their search for something more than casual sex with a slow dance and kiss on an empty dance floor at the end of the night. The two characters are set up as foils for one another, both viable options for sexual practice in a sexually liberated era, but Ken presented as the winner of something more meaningful and potentially enduring.

Finally, at the other extreme there is Marv Gomez who is presented as basically asexual. He dresses in an all-leather outfit akin to the leathermen of gay clone culture, but he wins dance contests with female partners. He is not at the Zoo to meet men or women for action or otherwise—he is there to dance—because to him, dancing is what disco is all about. Says Marv, "Only when I'm dancing do I know who I am," and dancing makes him feel alive and free. To many critics, his solo dance performance was

one of the only bright spots in an otherwise unremarkable film, so perhaps viewers would come away with the idea that disco-going was not necessarily about masculine posing on the dance floor, male exploitation of women for “action,” or the more enlightened search for a “nice” girl; but, rather, that it was merely about individual freedom through dance. Ultimately, disco movies were careful to include caricatures of the variety of masculine approaches to women and sex that existed in American society of the late 1970s. The subtle and not-so-subtle cues in these movies encouraging a more respectful approach by men toward women suggest a move away from traditional ideas of masculine sexual privilege and that masculine expressions of sexuality were beginning to take on qualities more readily identified as feminine as society strove to develop relationships that were more equitable.

At the very least, the assorted representations of masculinity suggest that disco as depicted in the movies had become a forum through which the tensions of an evolving masculinity could be debated. Film commentators had strong views about Tony Manero in particular, and the character became a focal point through which reviewers expressed their understandings of disco masculinity. Some were unable to see past the sexually brash, tough-guy aspect of Travolta’s character. According to *Washington Post* staff writer and film critic Gary Arnold, *Saturday Night Fever* was merely “concerned with promoting Travolta as a sex symbol.” Frank Rich, film critic for *Time* before becoming a columnist on American politics and popular culture for the *New York Times*, said Travolta in the role of Tony “convey[ed] the kind of threatening sexuality that floors an audience . . . his carnal presence can make even a safe Hollywood package seem like

dangerous goods.”<sup>58</sup> Nelson George, writing one of the only reviews of *Saturday Night Fever* in the black press, saw Tony only as “young, macho, cool . . . the classic Hollywood teenage hero. He gets high with his buddies, fights and has little respect for women—character traits that movie studs have sported for years.” George saw disco music as the only thing that “provides the 1970’s touch” and lamented that a generation of youths depicted in the film seemed to have no interest in the movements that defined the generation before them.<sup>59</sup> Virginia DeMoss, speaking to a gay readership, described Tony as “a regular guy who could drive fast, fight dirty, fuck hard and make women love him by treating them like shit.”<sup>60</sup> According to DeMoss, Tony’s ability to dance offered him a sense of self-expression, but it was only because he maintained a rough and misogynist masculinity that many “regular guys” were willing to emulate him and learn to enjoy that for which they had ridiculed gays for years. Jefre Harde, a reader of *Time* magazine complained, “*Saturday Night Fever* is a racist, sexist and offensive film. It has a Neanderthal mentality with 1970s vulgarity.”<sup>61</sup> His protest against the film is indicative of those who noticed only the most blatant aspects of the masculine comportment of Tony and his friends.

Yet, Harde’s complaint also suggests that even though he missed the subtle challenge to “Neanderthal mentality” offered by Travolta’s character, he would support its implications against sexism, racism, and offensive activity. Other reviewers readily

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<sup>58</sup> Gary Arnold, “Take Two Aspirin, Maybe ‘Fever’ Will Go Away,” *Washington Post*, 16 December 1977 and Frank Rich, “Discomania,” *Time*, 19 December 1977, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,945860,00.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Nelson George, “Sat. Night Fever: ‘70’s Epidemic,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 24 December 1977.

<sup>60</sup> Virginia DeMoss, “Disco: From High Camp to High Tech Gay Got It All Together,” *The Advocate*, 25 January 1979, 28-29.

<sup>61</sup> Jefre Harde, Letters, *Time*, 24 April 1978, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,916104,00.html>.



interpreted Tony's masculinity as complicated and more evolved than the rest of the Faces. Feminist film critic Molly Haskell told the readers of *New York* magazine that "gifted actor," Travolta "range[d] like six characters in search of an identity" in his portrayal of Tony. And Liz Smith, New York gossip columnist and former entertainment editor for *Cosmopolitan*, told her female readers that Tony was "a half-angel/half-punk who conceals tender feelings and good intentions under cramped-down ignorance and pained desperation."<sup>62</sup> Frank Rich even had something of a change of heart when he wrote about Travolta for *Seventeen* almost a year after his initial review of the film in *Time*. No longer merely a projection of threatening sexuality, now, "Travolta paints Tony Manero in a wide spectrum of colors" that included both sex appeal and vulnerability.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Andrew Sarris of the *Village Voice* described Tony's friends as "meaner, raunchier, more profane and more bigoted than he is," and noted film critic Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* talked about how Tony "begins to outgrow his gang of male friends who abuse their girlfriends."<sup>64</sup> These reviewers acknowledged the layered and uncertain approach to masculinity that the character of Tony was meant to express as part of a film depicting an era mixed up in gender change.

The main catalyst of Tony's growth as a man, however, caused further differences of opinion among commentators. Some, like Siskel, saw Tony's relationship with Stephanie as another enjoyable wrinkle in a complex and relevant portrayal of morality and growth amidst the confusing realities of violence, sex, and turmoil in the lives of teenagers in the 1970s. To him, Stephanie was a vehicle through which to mock Tony's

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<sup>62</sup> Molly Haskell, "High Travoltage," *New York*, 9 January 1978, 64 and Liz Smith, "Cosmo Goes the Movies, 'I've Got the Fever,'" *Cosmopolitan*, March 1978, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Frank Rich, "The Year of John Travolta," *Seventeen*, November 1978, 113.

<sup>64</sup> Andrew Sarris, "Ethnic Fever," *Village Voice*, 26 December 1977 and Gene Siskel, "'Saturday Night Fever' Leads to a Critical Case of Repeated Delirium," *Chicago Tribune*, 19 February 1978.

macho behavior, and ultimately force him and “all the Tony’s of the world” to consider a new kind of masculine interaction with women.<sup>65</sup> Others, such as Haskell and Sarris, felt that the relationship only served to “undercut the macho desperation that feeds and intensifies the Saturday-night fever” and was unnecessary moralizing commentary on the lifestyle of this Brooklyn community.<sup>66</sup> They understood Tony’s identity to be more complex and attuned to change than his friends—in part because of what a woman had taught him—but did not necessarily believe a commercial medium like a disco film should hold it up as a model for all men to follow.

### **Hollywood’s Take on Disco Femininity**

*Playboy*’s response to Tony’s development over the course of *Saturday Night Fever* was perhaps the most ambiguous response to this male-female relationship as catalyst: “Tony is a prince among punks and he begins to grow up a bit after he enters a \$500 dance contest with Stephanie . . . , a snotty, affected Bay Ridge chick who invents some minor details but is already shifting her dreams of glory to Manhattan.”<sup>67</sup> While Tony’s complex and evolving masculinity was positively perceived, describing him as “prince among punks” on the dance floor who began to “grow up a bit” through his relationship with Stephanie, it is only because the independent and ambitious young woman who challenges him is “a snotty, affected Bay Ridge chick”—a telling statement not only of thoughts on masculinity, but also on femininity in the disco film. Disco movies provided a forum in which to debate the confines of femininity and female sexuality in addition to masculinity. And responses like *Playboy*’s came from

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<sup>65</sup> Siskel, “Critical Case of Repeated Delirium.” Also see Kevin Thomas, “Tribal Rites in ‘Saturday Fever,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 December 1977.

<sup>66</sup> Haskell, “High Travoltage,” 65 and Sarris, “Ethnic Fever.”

<sup>67</sup> Movie, *Playboy*, March 1978, 33.

representations that tended to acknowledge female liberation, but not necessarily to condone it. Indeed, similar to how the representation of masculinity depicted back to the viewer the confusion that existed in his own life about how to act in a liberated era, the ways in which disco films dealt with femininity was a clear indication that they were working within the wake of women's liberation and sexual revolution and the complex relationship that developed between these two social "movements."

*Pleasure and Danger: Feminism and Sexual Freedom in the 1970s*

The new freedoms of the sexual revolution had replaced the former obligation women felt to avoid premarital sex and protect their virtue, but in the eyes of many women involved, such developments merely made them sexually available to any number of men, and sexuality claimed a central place in the women's liberation movement that thus developed. Sexually subordinate roles in the youth movement combined with the larger culture of commercialized sexuality—which often displayed women as nothing more than a collection of body parts—made many feminists view this change as a male sexual revolution in which women were exploited as sexual objects, warm bodies expected to cater to male pleasure.<sup>68</sup> Ideas about how to redefine this revolution to ensure gender equity and avoid female exploitation became a central debate within the feminist movement. What did it mean to be sexually liberated? And what role did sexual

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<sup>68</sup> For further discussion of women and sex in the student movement and counterculture see Linda Grant, "Introduction," *Sexing the Millennium: Women and the Sexual Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1994); Ruth Rosen, Chapter 4, "Leaving the Left," *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 94-140; Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 82-87; Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980); and Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

freedom have in women's liberation? "Wanting to be neither 'protected' nor 'prey,' women met nightly to discuss what to do."<sup>69</sup>

Liberal feminists such as Betty Friedan and many members of NOW (National organization for Women) questioned a focus on women's bodies and sexual agency as potentially detracting from other issues of equality, and feminism as a whole was concerned with a broad range of issues. Radical feminists also held a shared commitment to female sexual self-determination and a redefinition of the sexual revolution to include women's agency, especially between the years of 1968 and 1975. From legal equality and equal pay to women's health and the breakdown of gender ideals, feminism sought to help women escape the limiting ideal of the Feminine Mystique that restricted "proper" femininity to submissive wives and mothers whose proper place was in the home.<sup>70</sup> As a part of this struggle, radical feminists insisted that female sexual pleasure was a legitimate demand and that women's bodies were no longer simply the domains of child bearing and male sexual pleasure. Through consciousness raising groups and discussion of their sexual experiences (among other topics), women were empowered by the idea of seeking sexual pleasure and sex on their own terms, not merely catering to the desires of men. Radical feminists thus sought to define what pleased themselves as women, and saw the ability to search out, ask for, and instruct partners (or themselves) in this pleasure

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<sup>69</sup> Jo Freeman, "On the Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement from a Strictly Personal Perspective," in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation*, eds. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 176.

<sup>70</sup> This definition of feminism is complicated when taking into account black and working-class feminisms, but it remains a solid foundation from which to understand the idealized gender roles feminists sought to breakdown. I elaborate more on black feminism in chapters 4 and 5. Also see Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed American at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003) and Patricia Hill Collin, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 1991).

as an empowering tool of interpersonal relations. The female orgasm—clitoral or otherwise—came to represent women’s self-determination.<sup>71</sup>

Some feminists, even in this early period, questioned whether a commitment to female sexual pleasure through orgasm actually held as much transformative potential as the larger movement seemed to propound. Many wondered if an idea of female agency that seemed to emulate male sexuality as a model was the best way to pursue equality. A central question of debate was whether women seeking sexual pleasure on their own terms would help them achieve greater equality or only play into the sexual fantasies of men. Some radical feminists, viewing heterosexual sex as capitulation to female oppression, chose celibacy or lesbianism as their commitment to revolution. Others wished to redefine sexual pleasure in ways that moved beyond a preoccupation with orgasm. Feeling trapped in an “orgasm frenzy” in which they felt obligated to be promiscuous—not to cater to the pleasures of domineering men, but in order to prove their own liberation and commitment to sexual agency—these feminists theorized that, for women, emotional love and intimacy could be just as pleasurable as physical orgasm and redefined women’s sexual agency and self-determination in a way that included a wide range of stimulations, including both the emotional and the physical.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, for radical feminists, sexual freedom was about more than freedom to engage in sexual activity on their own terms; it was also about freedom from oppression, exploitation and violence. Yet, these feminists believed that an acknowledgement of the dangerous

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<sup>71</sup> For further discussion of how radical feminists theorized sexuality see Rosen, *World Split Open*; Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*; Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*; and Alice Echols, “The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics, 1968-83,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Pandora, 1992), 50-72.

<sup>72</sup> Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 109-112 and Paula Kamen, *Her Way: Young Women Remake the Sexual Revolution* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 47, 98-99. Also see Echols, “Taming of the Id.”

aspects of sex in a patriarchal social system did not negate the possibility and continued fight for sexual self-determination and pleasure.<sup>73</sup>

By the late 1970s, the dangers of sex had become a preoccupation for many feminists, and as the women's movement fragmented, radical feminism devolved into cultural feminism—predicated on natural differences between men and women and the abandonment of straightforward political activism in favor of individual development of female consciousness, female unity, and the exorcism of male values, especially through the development of a self-conscious and separate “women's culture.” As many Americans emphasized the problems of unrestrained sexuality and became increasingly hostile to the feminist movement, cultural feminism emerged as an ideology that emphasized female difference and understood male and female sexuality to be naturally distinct, rather than a difference of socialization that could be recognized and redefined. Cultural feminists idealized female sexuality as innately “muted, diffuse, and interpersonally-oriented,” focused on the search for reciprocity and intimacy. They depicted male sexuality, on the other hand, as uniformly “driven, irresponsible, genitally oriented, and potentially lethal,” focused on power and orgasm.<sup>74</sup> Unlike radical feminists who disparaged the exploitation of and violence against women in a sexualized society but continued to see positive potential and pleasure in female sexual exploration, cultural feminists depicted women's lives in a heterosexual society as so defined by danger “that it preclude[d] a consideration of sexual pleasure.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> For more information on radical feminism and sexual dangers see D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 314; Echols, “Taming of the Id”; Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*; and Rosen, *World Split Open*.

<sup>74</sup> Descriptions of sexuality taken from Echols, “Taming of the Id,” 59. Also see Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 152.

<sup>75</sup> Echols, “Taming of the Id,” 58. The political and cultural outgrowths of this theory were the pornography debates of the early 1980s. See Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 285-288; Kamen, *Her Way*, 185-

The departure from the radical feminist understanding of sexuality was appealing to lesbian separatists, who had chosen to separate themselves as much as possible from a hetero, patriarchal society, and heterosexual feminists, who were attracted to the concept of female unity and the idealization of difference. Yet, while cultural feminism became the dominant voice in the radical wing of the movement, its tendency toward behavioral prescriptions and woman-identified elitism alienated non-radical (or “not sufficiently radical”) women, and it failed to encompass the increasingly varied viewpoints of the rapidly fragmenting women’s liberation movement.<sup>76</sup> Liberal feminism became the dominant voice of women’s activism, and women’s liberation became a fragmented movement that various groups and individuals redefined and adapted to serve their unique situations. As explained by Jane Gerhard, “Core values forged in 1969 had, by 1976, been edited, expanded, and transformed as feminism itself became useful to more and more women. Values like self-determination . . . increasingly came to mean different things to different feminists. . . . Fissures multiplied at a breathtaking rate.”<sup>77</sup>

Sexuality and sexual liberation were central components of the feminism learned about, discussed and debated in popular culture and the pages of women’s magazines by women not necessarily involved in the activities of the women’s movement of the 1970s—so much so that scholars have interpreted this preoccupation with sexuality as a conflation of sexual liberation with the larger, more expansive goals of women’s liberation. It is not my intention to repeat that conflation; I merely choose to recognize

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187; Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1991), 252-254, 261-267; Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 173-177; and Rosen, *World Split Open*, 188-94.

<sup>76</sup> For more on cultural feminism see Carroll, *It Seemed like Nothing Happened*, 267; Grant, *Sexing the Millennium*, 206; Echols, “Taming of the Id”; Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*; and Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 149-182.

<sup>77</sup> Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 152.

the importance of this one element of feminism, especially within the mediated, popular culture version that most American women encountered and which was central to the culture of disco. These non-movement women expressed similar concerns as movement feminists—that they often felt like accessories to male pleasure in sexual encounters—and articles attempted to alleviate such concerns by instructing women on how to define and request their own pleasure in sexual relations. Magazine authors made reference to sexological studies so women would understand how their sexual response worked and be able to request the proper technique from their partners; they were also encouraged to pursue sex only on their own terms, only when they were ready to sleep with a man, not simply out of obligation or “payment” for a date.<sup>78</sup> While magazines often celebrated the sexually aggressive woman who was willing to go out and pursue her own sexual pleasure, the radical feminist notion of sex as more than orgasm was especially central in women’s magazines in the 1970s.<sup>79</sup> Even if it resembled cultural feminism’s definition of female sexuality as naturally relational, more inclined toward intimacy than men, the reassurance by women’s magazines that women were entitled to say no to sex unless in

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<sup>78</sup> For select examples see Ernest Havemann, “Making Too Much of Sex,” *Cosmopolitan*, February 1975; “To Bed or Not to Bed (That’s Not the Question!),” *Cosmopolitan*, November 1975; Gini Kopecky, “The Dating Scene,” *Seventeen*, January 1976; Claire Safran, “Plain Talk about the New Approach to Sexual Pleasure,” *Redbook*, March 1976; Abigail Wood, “Relating: Am I Really a Prude?” *Seventeen*, March 1976; Kurtz, “What’s Promiscuous Now?”; William S. Appleton, M.D., “Living Single in the Seventies: Sex,” *Cosmopolitan*, July 1976; Gloria Steinem, “Is There Sex after Sex Roles?” *Ms.*, November 1976; Leonoce Tifler, “Bargaining in Bed,” *Ms.*, November 1976; Alice Kosner, “Sexual Exclusivity,” *Cosmopolitan*, August 1977; Bebe Moore Campbell, “Sexual Freedom and ‘Now’ Women,” *Ebony*, August 1982; Dr. Debora Phillips with Robert Judd; “It’s Okay to Feel Good about Sex,” *Redbook*, July 1980.

<sup>79</sup> Compare articles such as Adelaide Bry, “The Sexually Aggressive Woman,” *Cosmopolitan*, July 1975; Nora Falletta, Speakeasy, “Want Me for My Body...Never Mind My Mind,” *Cosmopolitan*, June 1976; Sandi Cushman, “Sex and the Very Busy Woman,” *Vogue*, January 1981; and Paula Webster, “Going All The Way . . . To Pleasure,” *Ms.*, August 1982, to those such as Penelope Washburn, “Sensual, Loving, Free – Finding Your Sexual Self,” *Redbook*, January 1977; Stephen Wilding and Jason Winters, “Sex in the 70s,” *Essence*, February 1977; Philip and Loran Sarrel, “How Sensuous Do You Have to Be?” *Redbook*, May 1977; Roy Blount Jr., “The Orgasm: A Reappraisal,” *Cosmopolitan*, February 1978; Drs. Eli and Silvia Feldman, “The Meaning of Sexual Responsibility,” *Cosmopolitan*, December 1979; Sarah Crichton, “Sex and Self-Discovery,” *Ms.*, October 1983.



the context of a trusting, emotional relationship was not an attempt to color heterosexual sex as dangerous and incapable of true pleasure for women. Rather, it spoke to the reality in the lives of women who were not willing to give up the possibility of romantic relationships with men, and it offered respect for voluntary chastity that some women felt feminism's preoccupation with orgasm, did not.<sup>80</sup> Non-movement understandings of sexuality never lost sight of pleasure, even if pleasure was for many women defined within an emotional and romantic connection as much as physical.<sup>81</sup> The variety of approaches to sex taken by the female characters in *Saturday Night Fever* and *Thank God It's Friday* reflect these multiple and conflicting options for women in the new sexual landscape and the uncertainty of gender definition that they caused.<sup>82</sup>

*Feminism's Influence on Femininity and Female Sexuality in Film*

In a pattern parallel that of *Saturday Night Fever's* balancing act in the presentation of Tony Manero's masculinity, masculine aggression on the part of female characters (sexual or otherwise) needed to be balanced out by feminine objectification and vulnerability. Donna Summer's character in *Thank God It's Friday* is an interesting

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<sup>80</sup> "Sex-wise, why are we never, in your publication, offered an alternative? I mean chastity. It's not absurd—it's practical and it works," wrote an anonymous woman to *Ms.* See Letters, *Ms.*, September 1974, 8. The idea of romance was also a touchy subject in the pages of *Ms.* When Barbara Grizzuti Harrison argued that romance, while problematic, was alive and well for many feminists, the response was very mixed. See Harrison, "Is Romance Dead," *Ms.*, July 1974 and Letters, *Ms.*, November 1974. By the following year, even *Ms.* was endorsing chastity as an option, although for reasons more explicitly about power than other women's magazines. See "Living Without Them," *Ms.*, October 1975.

<sup>81</sup> The 1982 Barnard College Conference, "Towards a Politics of Sexuality," indicates that there existed a silenced contingent of radical feminists who remained dedicated to the dual nature of female sexuality throughout the 1970s. While the organized backlash against the conference suggests a hardening of differences in modern sexual values rather than the negotiation and compromise of the previous decade, the controversy is demonstrative of the ways in which women's demands for sexual pleasure remained contentious even in the 1980s. Most importantly, women at the Conference crafted a model of sexuality that was highly complex and individual, one that did not attempt to focus on a common female experience of sexual oppression or pleasure. See Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 183-195, and the published collection of papers from the conference: Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*.

<sup>82</sup> Beth Bailey briefly touches upon the varied approaches women took to sexual liberation in the 1970s. See Bailey, "She 'Can Bring Home the Bacon': Negotiating Gender in Seventies America" in *America in the Seventies*, ed. Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 116.

example of this balancing act. An aspiring singer who works her way onto the stage and into the heart of the DJ over the course of the evening, Nicole Sims enters the disco as a shy and innocent individual, conservatively dressed in a long blue skirt, and a baggy, striped button down, with a large blue handbag in tow. Sneaking her way into the DJ booth, and giving DJ “Bobby Speed” a sexy little stare, she makes an unsuccessful attempt to entice and convince him that she is the “hottest thing in all the New York discos,” even belting out a few off-kilter lines of the record being played on the dance floor—“Love to Love You Baby.” On her second attempt, she is dressed as a waitress for the club in silver hot pants and a form-fitting zebra-striped tank top. While Bobby makes sure to let Nicole know that she is beautiful, he still refuses to play her demo. Nicole is not a weak submissive female, however, and playing off the gains of the feminist movement, she lets “Mr. Big Shot DJ” know that “[her] mind’s made up, and when it’s made up, it stays made up!”—she will find a way to sing for the crowd. After crying in the bathroom, where all the other female characters in the film are also crying over their own individual situations—one of the scenes most reinforcing of traditional gender stereotypes—Nicole hears Franny’s resolve to win the dance contest later that evening and is even more determined to make herself a star. She pulls a big curly wig from her blue bag, and the next time we see her, Nicole is all decked out in a low-cut, red sequined gown and full makeup, an exotic flower tucked behind her right ear. She pushes her way through the crowded dance floor, invites herself onto the disco’s main stage and, ignoring the DJ’s protests, performs what would soon be Donna Summer’s mega-hit, “Last Dance.”

Predictably, Nicole's performance, which includes a few "I told you so" looks and "come hither" smiles to the DJ booth above, is a big hit with everyone in the club, not least of all, DJ Bobby Speed. It is the performance of a woman who has been transformed, over the course of the movie, from quiet and conservative to confident and sexy, a woman who has taken control of her career and her sexuality, all through the power of disco music. With a renewed sense of self, Nicole finds her way back to the DJ booth. She enters, softly singing "when I'm bad, I'm so so bad," and, having earned the affections of Bobby Speed through her strong and sexy performance, shares a romantic dance with the DJ who had kicked her out of his booth twice prior. Summer's character sends a message that it is okay for a woman to mix sex appeal with talent to get what she wants, be it recognition as a star, the heart of a man, or both. Since Nicole and Bobby only danced in the DJ booth and did not even share a kiss, Summer's performance also suggests that an assertive sense of sexuality in a woman does not necessarily have to end in (what some might view as dangerous and promiscuous) physical relations. However, this love storyline also serves to balance out her active and aggressive (read: masculine) professional tactics—Nicole can succeed in the world of showbiz only because she has been feminized as the love interest of the man in charge.

Donna Summer playing Nicole Sims may have been a key storyline in *Thank God It's Friday*, but there are at least six others going on simultaneously, many of which offer further insight into the entertainment media's response to female sexuality in the disco era. One of the best lines in the entire movie occurs when a married woman, Sue, undoes two of the buttons on her dress and opens it to reveal a bit more of her chest. At the protestation of her husband, Dave, her retort is, "They're my tits, not yours." To which

Dave comments, “You’re my wife! That makes them *our* tits. And our tits should be home where they belong, not out on the town.” Sue takes the disco as an opportunity to embrace her sexuality in a way that she has not in the past, but her more open and public sexual display is a threat to her husband’s sense of ownership over her. In the environment of the disco, however, she is emboldened to explore this sexuality even more by accepting an invitation to dance with Tony Di Marco, owner of the Zoo. For Sue, a woman who has grown accustomed to the routine of married life, the disco becomes a place where she and her husband can “experience new things,” be more open. And while the setting allows her to explore her sexuality in new ways that challenge her and her husband’s understandings of gender and sexual roles, in the end, it is deemed scary and dangerous. Sue not only wants to go home because “this place is driving [her] crazy” and “this all is just so bad”; she also expresses fear about what is happening to their relationship and reverts back to the sexual object only her husband can enjoy, teasing, “I’m drunk; you can take advantage of me.” With this exchange, disco is readily identified with casual sex and promiscuous sexuality (not to mention the drugs that Dave is given by the pill-popping, pink-wigged female companion with whom he cavorts for the evening), making it a place where singles might meet but that is dangerous for married partners. Open and aggressive female sexuality is acknowledged, but the traditional marriage contract is affirmed.

In addition to these female storylines, there is also the arc of Frannie and Jeannie as well as that of Maddy and Jennifer—a kind of female compliment to Ken and Carl. Similar to Carl’s preoccupation with hot women, Maddy is obsessed with all the “hunks” at the disco and is excited about the prospect of meeting men for some casual fun. She is

more comfortable and aggressive in her sexuality than Jennifer who is looking for “just one nice guy” and is uncomfortable, awkward, and clumsy in the disco environment. Maddy is not punished for her open and casual approach to sex; her storyline merely ends with her leaving Jennifer at the disco to go to a Jacuzzi party with men she has met that night. Jennifer, however, representing the more traditionally feminine role of nonsexual creature looking for love is rewarded with the romantic moment with Ken in the last scene of the film. The more liberated (read: masculine) sexuality of Maddy is balanced out by Jennifer’s shy and feminine approach to sexual relationships. To round out the caricatures of possibilities, Frannie and Jeannie who are at the Zoo merely to participate in the dance contest are the counterpart to Marv Gomez, representing the nonsexual aspect of disco as just an excuse to dance. Combined together, *Thank God It’s Friday* presents a wide range of possibilities concerning femininity and female sexuality in the disco world, the more radical influences of the women’s liberation movement balanced out by the glorification of more traditional roles.<sup>83</sup>

*Saturday Night Fever* maintains the same ambiguous take on female sexuality and complicated representations of femininity, most markedly through the characters of Annette and Stephanie. Annette, like most of the women at 2001 Odyssey, is eager to find a man, but she also comes off as desperate, needing the approval of men to define who she is. Having sex with men, or at least garnering the attention of the Faces, is how Annette and the other women at 2001 define their self-worth. But for Annette, sex is also

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<sup>83</sup> A similar balancing act occurs in *Disco Fever* with the objectification of the “loose” women Brian attempts to hook up with as the camera literally pans over various parts of their bodies. In addition, Cybil who is aggressive both professionally and sexually is the clear loser/villain in this film, her sexual choices portrayed as negative. On the other hand, Jill, who engages in premarital sex but sex for love, is given a positively portrayed love storyline, and Renny, Cybil’s assistant who is basically nonsexual except for a rejection of one man’s sexual advances, is the heroine who comes to the realization that Cybil is the enemy and quits her job.

about winning the affection of the man she thinks she loves. She openly confesses her love to Tony, believing this will convince him to be with her—to sleep with her for the moment, but ultimately to marry her. She’s willing to sleep with him because she loves him, as she expresses in the backseat of the car, “it doesn’t matter, Tony, I love you.” But in Tony’s world, where “it’s a decision a girl’s gotta make early in life, if she’s gonna be a nice girl or a cunt,” Annette is a nice girl who wants sex for love, wants sex to lead to marriage.<sup>84</sup> Tony rejects Annette’s response of “I don’t know. Both?” saying, “you can’t be both,” and as Kelly explains, “tries to avoid Annette because he fears her desire to become ‘a married sister.’ Her love offers him a vision of further confinement.”<sup>85</sup> Tony, who thinks he only wants cunts because sex is meaningless and women only sexual objects, refuses Annette. Annette then tries to turn herself into a cunt, first by showing Tony she really wants to sleep with him and coming prepared with her own condoms, and then by offering herself to Double J in the vain attempt to convince Tony she is willing to sleep around, that she too can be a cunt. Her descent into sexual promiscuity, however, ends tragically with the backseat gang rape.

But the reason for Annette’s punishment is debatable, and her tortuous quest for a sexual relationship based on love representative of the conflict women, especially, felt about sexual liberation. Annette’s pitiable predicament seems to suggest that the film’s producers condemn her desire to maintain the traditional trappings of femininity—love, marriage, family—encouraging women to reach beyond those constraints for something more, for independence, a la Stephanie. One could argue, however, that it is not

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<sup>84</sup> I will discuss further the debatable nature of Annette’s categorization as “nice girl” or “cunt” below, but the following exchange seems to suggest that Tony thinks of her as a nice girl: Annette: Ain’t ya gonna ask me to sit down? Tony: No, ‘cause you would do it. Annette: Bet you’d ask me to lay down. Tony: No, you would not do it. It is only after she is raped that Tony scolds her saying, “Now you’re a cunt.”

<sup>85</sup> Kelly, “More Than a Woman,” 243-44.

Annette's desire to fall into socially constructed norms of love, marriage, and family that leads to her gang rape. Rather, it is her capitulation to easy sex in a desperate attempt to meet those ends that is so violently punished: not fully understanding the power of herself as sexual subject, entitled to choice and agency in her sexual relations so that being an easy target for sex is not a definition of self-worth, she feels she must become a cunt to please the Faces, to gain Tony's love and affection, or at the very least his attention. Annette's story in *Saturday Night Fever*, therefore, should also be read as a statement about the dangers of sexual liberation for women. The fact that Annette thinks she can be both, nice girl *and* cunt, not only is a reflection of the confusion sexual liberation caused for women; it pokes holes in Tony's theory. Annette was certainly not the only woman of the era who somehow forgot to make that early-life decision, assuming there was room for them to be both—or to drop the labels altogether—in the new sexual landscape of the time (although it is interesting that her response to Tony's question is “both?” instead of “neither?”). Stephanie then comes along and blows the theory wide open.

If Annette represents the pre-feminist woman, influenced by changes in sexual mores but having not yet had her consciousness raised to know that she can take control of her own sexuality or her own life to move beyond the limited social expectations to which she has confined herself by depending on the men of Bay Ridge, Stephanie represents something more. Stephanie lives in Manhattan (she moves there by the middle of the film) and works as a secretary for a celebrity talent agency, constantly (and often hilariously) trying to prove her sophistication through name-dropping and overly enthusiastic descriptions of life on the other side of the River. She is independent and in control, not desperate for the attention of men to define her self-worth. Stephanie's break

from the traditional strictures of female life in working-class Brooklyn suggests an alternative form of femininity, one that is compatible with independence and ambition. Moreover, she knows how to be in control of her sexuality, not allowing Tony to take advantage of her. She is not a nice girl because there are suggestions that she has slept around, but she is also not a cunt because she is not willing to give it up to just any guy. Unlike Annette who tries to be both nice girl and cunt, and is punished, Stephanie is confined by neither of those labels, which while confusing Tony, also intrigues him and which the producers reward with the somewhat nebulous designation of “friend.” Her relatively masculine professional ambition is balanced out by her more discerning sexual proclivities, which are even further balanced out by the femininity she displays as the woman Tony deems the best female dancer at 2001.

Overall, the depictions of women in *Saturday Night Fever* present a very ambiguous response to the influences of liberation in women’s lives, and the written reactions to these characters were similarly ambivalent. To some, the female story lines were insignificant. Gary Arnold’s review in the *Washington Post* was almost entirely devoted to analyzing Travolta’s dancing and Tony’s story as if women played no role. His only mentions of women were to contend that the movie would have been better as a romantic comedy about the nature of attraction between Tony and Stephanie and to mention how “Tony is adored by the dumpy and/or slutty girls who appear to frequent the Bay Ridge disco.”<sup>86</sup> Other men were similarly disparaging when they spoke of the female characters. For example, Art Harris, serving a stint as film critic before moving on to other entertainment and political news, understood “girls like Annette” to “paint on

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<sup>86</sup> Arnold, “Take Two Aspirin.”



the lacquered look of love and try to turn hunters like Tony Manero . . . into husbands.” He described Stephanie’s ambitions and agency merely as an “air of calculated indifference” that “chips away at Tony’s pack allegiance.”<sup>87</sup> In this interpretation, a woman is either too devoted to gaining male attention, offering what Kelly described as “unsolicited love,” or not appropriately deferential to men—both strategies threatening to Tony’s masculine sensibilities by either trapping him in unwanted commitment or jeopardizing his homosocial bonding with alternative conceptions of the world.<sup>88</sup>

Other reviewers—male and female—were far more positive and nuanced in how they understood Stephanie’s character as representative of the liberated woman. For example, Kevin Thomas, film critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, described Stephanie as “different from the rest, more assured, sophisticated—and distant. She’s not about to beg for the privilege of wiping the perspiration from Tony’s brow, as one girl does.”<sup>89</sup> Thomas also understands Stephanie as different because “she’s desperately trying to better herself, yet the life of the local discotheque still means something to her. She doesn’t intend to become involved with Tony but agrees to being his partner in an upcoming dance contest.”<sup>90</sup> Stephanie’s ambitions, as Thomas sees them, are a

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<sup>87</sup> Art Harris, “The Movies at Saturday Night, With a Reel Disco King,” *Washington Post*, 16 December 1977. According to his website, Art Harris would go on to win “an American Women in Radio & Television Award and a WorldFest Gold Award in 1996 for the ‘positive portrayal of women.’ The story: a profile of a Georgia prosecutor who coped with her fiancé’s murder by crusading for crime victims in court,” suggesting just how uncertain and in transition gender relations were when he wrote his less-than-kind review of *SNF* in the 1970s. See “About Art Harris,” *Art Harris: The Bald Truth*, <http://www.artharris.com/about-art-harris/>.

<sup>88</sup> Kelly, “More Than a Woman,” 243-44. Also see Haskell, “High Travoltage” who sees the role of women as undermining the inherently macho realm of the working-class disco, as discussed above, and conservative commentator William F. Buckley Jr., “America’s Fever Lasts Beyond Saturday Night,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 April 1978, who refers to Stephanie as “the girl” meant only to provide “a little upwardly-mobile action” that “the writers . . . figure . . . is probably necessary” in a highly sarcastic and condescending tone.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas, “Tribal Rites in ‘Saturday Fever.’”

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

complicated negotiation of new and old, her distance a welcome contrast to the desperation of the other women at 2001. Moreover, Thomas is willing to acknowledge Stephanie's agency and independence as she actively dictates the tenor of her relationships and pursuits. According to Thomas, "Stephanie is a young woman in transition, vulnerable to pretense, but 'Saturday Night Fever' respects her aspirations, and it is through her that Tony begins to think about what he should do about his own life."<sup>91</sup> Stephanie's development is not simple or absolute; it is a "transition" that, however, inconsistent, Thomas sees as deserving of respect, both in terms of its meaning for Stephanie as an independent woman and in how it urges Tony to grow in turn. As Marsha Kinder also pointed out, "In former years, she would have helped push 'her man' to the top...; but, in this modish film she's trying to push herself and drags Tony along with her almost inadvertently."<sup>92</sup> Kinder clearly recognized this "modish" film as an attempt to engage with the recent changes in gender relations, but offered no further comment on the value of Stephanie's respective pushing of herself and dragging of Tony except to express her opinion of Karen Lynn Gorney as a generally lackluster talent.

Kinder was, however, one of the few commentators who offered any extended thoughts on female sexuality as represented through Gorney's character. Hers was a critical appraisal: "Stephanie . . . is symptomatic of Hollywood's treatment of women in the new era of sexual liberation. While clearly contrasting with the old stereotypes of nice girl and 'cunt' . . . she represents an inadequate attempt to break with the old clichés. . . . she may sleep around but she's still 'worthy' of a young man's friendship."<sup>93</sup> Kinder

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Kinder, Review of *Saturday Night Fever*, 41.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

fails to offer any alternative or further explanation and leaves the reader assuming that she means to take Stephanie basically as “worthy cunt” in contrast to the “unworthy cunts” with whom Tony and his friends typically associate. A reasonable interpretation, but Gorney’s character should be given more credit for the agency she practices in deciding with whom she will or will not sleep and at what moments, best exemplified by her refusal to have sex with Tony in the car even after having kissed him on the dance floor. Stephanie does not feel compelled to sleep with a man to prove herself liberated but neither does she abide by the typical restrictions on premarital sexual relations.

That she has taken such active control of her sex life is, in fact, a significant break with old clichés, which William Kelly picked up on, explaining how “Stephanie has transcended the categories of cunt and good girl to become ‘friend.’ In so doing, she is freed from the respective tentacles attendant to those titles.”<sup>94</sup> More than just contrasting old categories, as Kinder reads things, Stephanie “transcends” them, according to Kelly—offering a completely new identity for women, which also allows men and women to make an attempt at understanding each other as human beings rather than potential sexual or dating partners required to abide by a socially accepted and expected gender script.<sup>95</sup> Yet, while Kinder and Kelly understood Stephanie to fit neither category of “nice girl” or “cunt,” a *Variety* review placed her as an “elusive ‘good’ girl,” suggesting that the definitions of such old stereotypes were unstable.<sup>96</sup> Annette’s status as either nice girl or cunt was similarly debatable: the *Variety* review said that she was “an available ‘bad’ girl,” whereas Kinder categorized her as “the potential nice girl who just wants to get the

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<sup>94</sup> Kelly, “More Than a Woman,” 246.

<sup>95</sup> This new kind of engagement between men and woman as represented through Tony and Stephanie dovetails well with what Beth Bailey describes as possibly the most revolutionary change of the sexual revolution. See Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*, esp. chp. 8, “Remaking Sex.”

<sup>96</sup> *Variety* review quoted in The Saturday Column, *Chicago Tribune*, 4 February 1978.

boys' attention."<sup>97</sup> Definitive distinctions are irrelevant; the mere fact of contrasting classifications on the part of different writers is another sure sign of the ambiguity of gender and sexuality in this liberated era, and that disco films readily spoke to that confusion.

### **Conclusion: Some Thoughts on Consumer Reception**

The disco films presented this ambiguity over female sexual liberation and male sexual privilege with disco as the background and setting, making a connection between the sexual proclivities explored and the disco phenomenon itself. The films thus suggested that the disco was a place where people could put into practice any number of gender or sexual expressions, but where certain ones were more acceptable than others. There remained womanizing men who felt their masculinity hinged on objectifying and sleeping with any women they wanted, and there were women, like Annette, who interpreted sexual liberation as saying yes so men would give them attention. But there were also women, like Stephanie and Jennifer, who knew their self-worth was not dependent on having easy sex with demanding men. Indeed, these women actively rejected men's claims to sexual privilege through insults and refusals that not only challenged men's understanding of masculine sexual privilege but also redefined female sexuality as an active and subjective matter of choice. In turn, these movies suggested that a more equitable approach to sexual relationships on the part of men was something that disco could accommodate in addition to the casual sex and promiscuity in which other singles might engage.

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<sup>97</sup> Kinder, Review of *Saturday Night Fever*, 42.

I choose to explain the American public's enthusiasm over *Saturday Night Fever* and *Thank God It's Friday* in terms of how the representations of gender and sexuality corresponded with the confusion and uncertainty of the era in which they were produced, thus offering an opportunity to reflect upon and engage with the new roles of women and men in a changing society. Indeed, discos were places where at least some people understood these confusing developments to be acted out, as evidenced by comments from Chuck Sacci, one of the actors in *Thank God It's Friday*, who said, "Guys tell me a lot of bull about going to discos looking for one-night stands. But I think they're looking for the same things girls who go to discos . . . are looking for—good relationships."<sup>98</sup> A disco film like *Thank God It's Friday* elaborated on this ambivalence and helped viewers find humor in it. At least one viewer defended the movie in just such terms: "The characters in the film were stereotyped for a reason—these are people all of us have known at one time and we can identify with them."<sup>99</sup> Interpretations of these films did not always match, but the conception of them as relevant artifacts of an era and pastime were consistent. For example, Gene Siskel deemed *Saturday Night Fever* "for all of its foul language, violence, and rough sex . . . a very moral film," while conservative commentator William F. Buckley, Jr., through his condescending and sarcastic tone, asserted its immorality, but both felt it was representative of a generation of youths—for better or worse.<sup>100</sup> And Nelson George asserted, "The fact that Tony and his crew are white doesn't render their story irrelevant to the Black experience. The same Saturday Night bomb . . . explodes with as much or more resonance in . . . all of New York's Black

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<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Swisher, "'TGIF'-SRO!" 50.

<sup>99</sup> Jeffrey M. Eletto, letter to the editor, *Billboard*, 17 June 1978. Also see Swisher, "'TGIF'-SRO!" which describes the film as "a token of our time" and "a revealing social document" (49).

<sup>100</sup> Siskel, "Critical Case of Repeated Delirium" and Buckley, "America's Fever Lasts."

communities.”<sup>101</sup> Moreover, as Yanc argues, presenting its main character in a way that was pleasing to both gay and straight audiences contributed to the broad appeal of *Saturday Night Fever*, which in turn contributed to the popularity of disco culture.<sup>102</sup>

The massive success of *Saturday Night Fever*, however, can also be explained as a general misinterpretation of the film and the creative appropriation of only the most glossy and upbeat parts of an otherwise bleak and depressing story. “An enthralling R-rated . . . docudrama of the disco underclass,” *Saturday Night Fever* was meant to show the darker side of working-class disco—highlighting the role it played as a form of escape in the lives of youths while still revealing its seamy, misogynist, and hierarchical aspects in addition to the generally rough life of Bay Ridge’s youths.<sup>103</sup> Tim Lawrence emphatically argues that *Saturday Night Fever* was “a film not so much about dance culture as about escaping dance culture.”<sup>104</sup> And his interpretation is well supported by the arc of Tony Manero’s story—the fact that he discovers himself trapped and unhappy, realizing the path to further development is leaving Bay Ridge and 2001 Odyssey. Tony himself tells Stephanie that he would like to get the same high he gets from dancing elsewhere in his life and that “dancing, it can’t last forever, it’s a short-lived kind of thing.” The racist conclusion to the dance contest that Tony feels compelled to make right seems to be a clear condemnation of the lifestyle at 2001 that Tony then must escape, and in fact, the disco and dance scenes make up just less than half the film. *Saturday Night Fever* was a movie that gave disco culture a central place, but did not necessarily support it.

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<sup>101</sup> George, ““Sat. Night Fever: ‘70’s Epidemic.””

<sup>102</sup> Yanc, ““More Than A Woman””

<sup>103</sup> Cherie Burns, *Off the Screen, People*, 9 January 1978, 22.

<sup>104</sup> Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 305. Also see Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, 7-12.

Nonetheless, the parts that its largely middle-class, white audience found most appealing about the film were the flashy dance scenes. Most reviewers were quick to point out that “the most enjoyable scenes in ‘Saturday Night Fever’ take place in the club” and that Travolta’s “dancing is electric.”<sup>105</sup> A few picked up on the fact that the film had a critical message and “an authentic statement to make about America’s newest crop of alienated youth,”<sup>106</sup> but they tended to find its follow through lacking and overly sentimentalized,<sup>107</sup> praised the dancing equally or more highly than the story that “doesn’t do much more than dramatize limited horizons,”<sup>108</sup> or simply dismissed it as “an urban exploitation film.”<sup>109</sup> The producers did not take out or sanitize the more distasteful realism—things like foul language, sex in the back of cars, unexpected pregnancy, violence—for middle-class consumption (although the PG version that was released early in 1979 did do that to some extent), and some viewers expressed discomfort and displeasure with the fact that “‘Saturday Night Fever’ assaults you with a flagrantly foul-mouthed script and coarse viewpoint.”<sup>110</sup> But most shared the understanding of long-time writer at *Seventeen* Edwin Miller and the millions of teens he

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<sup>105</sup> Gene Siskel, “Energy, Reality Make ‘Fever’ Dance,” *Chicago Tribune*, 16 December 1977 and Rich, “Discomania.”

<sup>106</sup> Rich, “Discomania.” Also see Werner, “Disco Flicks” and Joy Gould Boyum, “Dancing Through the Pain,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 December 1977.

<sup>107</sup> Rich, “Discomania”; Sarris, “Ethnic Fever”; and Haskell, “High Travoltage.”

<sup>108</sup> Harris, “The Movies at Saturday Night.” Also see Siskel, “Critical Case of Repeated Delirium”; Werner, “Disco Flicks”; and Dobilas Matulionis, “Travolta Ignites Feverish Flick,” *Michigan Daily*, 12 January 1978.

<sup>109</sup> Arnold, “Take Two Aspirin.” Kelly, “More Than a Woman,” argued that “By sensationalizing its lower middle-class milieu through the addition of gang fights, suicide, and easy sexuality, *Saturday Night Fever* quite consciously invokes the long-standing attraction of that sub-culture for American audiences” (236).

<sup>110</sup> Arnold, “Take Two Aspirin.” Also see James W. Arnold, *Saturday Night Fever and Its Audience* (Marquette University, 1979), in which a student researcher interviewed 62 university students about their thoughts on the film. 32% of the sample remembered disliking “language/sex,” but only a small minority of 18% described their overall reaction to the film as negative. Notably, 48% of the overall sample said that an “aspect of the movie disturb[ed] or upset” them, but the “sources for those who were upset” was only 16% for sex, compared to 21% for language, 19% for family scenes, and 16% for violence. The vague category, “Combination of above,” constituted 25%.

claimed were drawn in by Travolta's dancing and "immediately absorbed the essence of the movie's message—of a teen-age dream where you could be *somebody* once you stepped on the dance floor."<sup>111</sup> The story these viewers saw was not one that criticized disco as an illusory high that needed to be escaped in order to reach one's full potential; rather, it was one in which disco itself provided the means through which someone could find meaning in life. As the film's star so astutely noted, "there is a side to the film that's exciting and flashy, and that's the thing that sticks with people."<sup>112</sup> The darker reality elements and critical interpretation of disco culture were not what most captivated the mainstream audiences of *Saturday Night Fever*; instead, they latched on to the universalizing, escapist, strobe-lit atmosphere of the disco, claiming the entertainment form as their own.

Most viewers chose to engage with the film's story of limited horizons and downtrodden lifestyle only to the extent that they too were living through an economic recession and increasingly found release through disco dancing. Once the larger mainstream appropriated *Saturday Night Fever* and its story of workaday reality of the week versus the glamorous fantasy of the weekend as its own, the class aspect of the movie and, thus, of disco generally, fell to the wayside—ultimately dismissing the real-life struggles of the working class, and at the same time turning disco's media face into something more akin to the outrageousness of *Thank God It's Friday* rather than the humble escapism and self-definition of its origins. "Disco became popular because the bulk of the American public was too dumb to realize that *Saturday Night Fever* was a

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<sup>111</sup> Edwin Miller, "Discomania," *Seventeen*, February 1979, 106. "As one recent graduate of a Washington, D.C., high school explained: '*Saturday Night Fever* is my life. It says that if you dance well and look great, you're on top, even if you work pumping gas.'" See Rich, "The Year of John Travolta," 113.

<sup>112</sup> Playboy Interview: John Travolta, *Playboy*, December 1978, 106.



put-down of that silly disco lifestyle,” complained Chicago’s anti-disco leader Steve Dahl. “Instead, they wanted to run out and join it.”<sup>113</sup> Perhaps these disco newcomers were duped into joining a “silly” lifestyle; perhaps they chose to understand Tony’s story as one of hope amidst despair and disco as the purveyor of that hope. Whatever the reason, much of “Middle America” gravitated to *Saturday Night Fever* to see for themselves what disco was all about, and along the way, discovered that they enjoyed it—the music was catchy and the dancing exciting, offering an opportunity to escape from the pressure and boredom of everyday life.<sup>114</sup> As disco diva Gloria Gaynor once described it, “Disco is to me more than just music. It’s a necessary means of releasing tension and frustration during the economic struggle the entire world is going through. It’s what people want and need.”<sup>115</sup> Disco became understood as a universal form of escape in which all classes (and races/ethnicities) could participate to alleviate the recessionary economic times of the late 1970s.

Such selective appropriation might lead us to assume that the more tawdry sexual elements of *Saturday Night Fever* disco would also be written out of the mainstream, media-darling version of disco. Yet, even a cursory exploration of the music, press, and cultural products of disco at its apex reveal that the ideas of sexual permissiveness, exploration, and display at work in the working-class disco of *Saturday Night Fever* are also present in the middle-class, *Thanks God It’s Friday* adaptation of disco, albeit in a more celebratory, less complicated, manner. And the fact of the matter is, the popularity of the disco boom after *Saturday Night Fever* was so all-encompassing that both versions

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<sup>113</sup> Dahl quoted in Clarence Page, “Disco Grows as Rock Fans Cry ‘Enough,’” *Chicago Tribune*, 12 July 1979.

<sup>114</sup> For a similar primary discussion of SNF’s appeal see Radcliffe A. Joe, *This Business of Disco* (New York: Billboard Books, 1980), 102-3.

<sup>115</sup> Words of the Week, *Jet*, 15 November 1979, 40.

existed simultaneously in many forms across the country, not to mention every other possible variation on the disco theme from the most sedate and reserved to the all-out fantasy and revelry of places like the legendary Studio 54. In a depressed economy and uncertain political and social atmosphere, perhaps new ideas of gender and sexuality within a realm of escape were exactly what Americans desired most. No matter their reasoning, those who sought to venture into the discotheque were confronted with the need to learn how to display themselves properly in that space—they needed to learn how to dance and dress for the disco round.

### Chapter 3

#### **Teaching Self-Expression: Disco Dancing and Dressing in a Liberated Era**

During the week of 26 July 1975, Van McCoy's song "The Hustle" hit number one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. That same Saturday, the *Chicago Tribune's* Tempo section kicked off a new feature called "The Saturday How" with simple and easy instructions on "How to Hustle without Hassle."<sup>1</sup> The article was indicative of a new dance craze that seemed to herald a transformation in dance from the Woodstock-esque "formless expression of ecstasy" to a structured form that needed to be learned and taught.<sup>2</sup> As William Safire, former Nixon speechwriter and political columnist for the *New York Times*, editorialized, "Suddenly, attention must be paid, steps must be learned, as the free lunch is swept off the dance floor and dancers can once again be rated as smoothies or stumblers, born leaders or hopeless cornstompers." As Safire saw things, a new standard in dance had evolved; success at the Hustle required "study, practice and work."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, viewers of *Saturday Night Fever*, many of whom had not yet set foot inside a discotheque, learned that there was no faking it if one wanted to be a disco star. As the music and dancing steadily gained ground, entrepreneurs increasingly sought to capitalize on the idea that disco dances—along with a more encompassing "disco style"—needed to be learned and could be taught through various media.

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Dunham, "How to Hustle Without Hassle" *Chicago Tribune*, 26 July 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Abe Peck, "Introduction," in *Dancing Madness*, ed. Abe Peck and Suzy Rice (New York: Anchor Press, 1976), 6.

<sup>3</sup> William Safire, "On the Hustle," *New York Times*, 4 August 1975.

Learning how to dance and dress was especially necessary because discos were such visually oriented places. Potential dancers sought lessons through books, instructional records, and television shows in order to fit in with the crowd, make a good impression, and mingle confidently with the opposite sex. People of all demographics filled up dance studios, night schools, local YMCAs, and the discotheques themselves asking for lessons on disco dancing along with various other ballroom dances and trends.<sup>4</sup> Those for whom lessons proved prohibitively expensive or who were too bashful to learn in a group setting purchased books and tuned in to shows like *Disco Step-by-Step*, which first aired in 1976, with a format specifically meant to teach the latest steps. With so many options available, people could learn to disco “at [their] own pace, and in the privacy of [their] own home” and could do so without having “to spend money for expensive instruction,” resulting in an even wider audience for the disco scene.<sup>5</sup> Between 1974 and 1977, only three books describing the disco craze went to print, but after the release of *Saturday Night Fever* and before the end of 1980, the total came to more than thirty.<sup>6</sup> While I have lumped them all together under the common heading “disco instructional guides,” these books can be further divided into three overlapping

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<sup>4</sup> Especially in the early years of mainstream disco, various periodicals tended to celebrate a general revival in social dance, particularly touch-dance, rather than a specific experience of “disco.” As such, dance studios reported an increase in all dance classes, even if the Hustle dominated. See, for example, “America Dances,” *Esquire*, December 1974; Dena Kleiman, “The ‘Hustle’ Restores Old Touch to Dancing,” *New York Times*, 12 July 1975; and Elaine Markoutsas, “Do Ya Wanna Dance? Here’s Where to Learn,” *Chicago Tribune*, 23 January 1976.

<sup>5</sup> *Let’s Disco: A Complete Instructional System on Disco Dancing*, (K-Tel International, 1978), 9. Another guide that explicitly makes these claims is Lester Wilson, *Dance Dance Dance*, (Brookville Marketing Corp., 1978), 5; Dick Blake, *The New Disco Touch Dancing* (Cleveland Heights, OH: You, 1974), 6. The trend of learning and practicing disco in one’s home has an interesting correlation to the arguments of David Nasaw and Robert Putnam about the death of public amusements and social engagement after 1965, but paradoxically, people were supposedly practicing disco dancing in preparation to go out and enjoy the public amusement of the discotheque with a community of dancers. See David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) and Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> This number does not include at least five books on roller disco or fictionalized depictions of disco.

categories—(1) dance manuals written by professional dance instructors meant to teach steps; (2) disco guidebooks that focused on describing the clubs and culture of disco, written most often by journalists already reporting on disco and other entertainment forms in the periodical press; and (3) beauty and fashion guides offering advice on fashion and makeup, written by key figures in those fields. Most disco guidebooks also included dance steps, and many dance manuals supplemented their illustrated instructions with descriptions of the larger disco scene—clubs, fashion, performers, etc.—making it clear that there was a discotheque and a disco dance out there for everyone, as long as s/he dressed in a particular way and went to the right club.

Many authors declared their book to be the “first” available guide on the disco dance craze, and others tried to assert a sense of authority and authenticity, such as Lester Wilson clearly advertising his role as the choreographer of *Saturday Night Fever* and Karen Lustgarten and Jack and Kathleen Sims Villari claiming to have been active participants in the disco scene well before it hit “the world of John Q. Public.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, however, such products threatened to impose structure and standardization upon a form that evolved from an underground dance scene that had prided itself on its natural creativity and freedom of expression. Those unstructured roots, combined with the unique historical context in which disco found popularity, meant that instructional disco products had the curious task of teaching self-expression. The mainstream disco industry attempted to capitalize on a context of social liberation while simultaneously limiting the ways in which dancers “properly” expressed that liberation. “Freedom” and

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<sup>7</sup> Wilson, *Dance Dance Dance*; Jack Villari and Kathleen Sims Villari, *The Official Guide to Disco Dance Steps* (Chicago: Domus Books, 1978); Karen Lustgarten, *The Complete Guide to Disco Dancing* (New York: Warner Books, 1978).

“expression” remained buzzwords within mainstream disco, and authors had to acknowledge that there was a general lack of standardization for disco dances because names and specific steps varied by region, if not individual clubs. But it also remained a clear, if unstated, goal of instructional guides to provide “a structured approach to disco dance.”<sup>8</sup> These teaching products served as both necessity and encouragement for the would-be disco dancer, and the mass of people who consumed them learned more than just dance steps and disco style; they learned what was appropriate in terms of gender and sexuality within the disco world.

The sense of structured freedom in dance and dress that the would-be disco-goer learned in these instructional products was most centrally about expressing one’s sexuality on the dance floor. Embracing the rhetoric of the era, instruction on disco dancing and dressing offered a variety of sexual and gender expressions as possible options on the disco floor, and disco became a reflection of one’s sexuality. As the owner of one of New York City’s most successful discotheques described, “A good dancer always fascinates the crowd watching him, and each of his moves is like a sensual vibe of a good lover.”<sup>9</sup> While she acknowledged that a good dancer is not always a good lover, underscoring the performance aspect of disco, the frank and unashamed connection between dancing and sex was partly the result of a new sexual openness in post-sixties American culture. A quote from fashion designer Stephen Burrows nicely sums up a similar attitude in fashion: “The motivation behind dressing for disco is sex.”<sup>10</sup> It was the 1970s: people were coming to terms with their sexuality in more public ways than ever

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Fallon, *The Art of Disco Dancing* (Reston, VA: National Dance Association, 1980), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Regine, “Disco Dancing,” *Vogue*, November 1977, 254.

<sup>10</sup> Burrows quoted in Leonard McGill, *Disco Dressing: A Complete Guide for Men and Women on How to Create Seven Smash Disco Looks* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 2.

before, and disco instructional guides taught them to understand the dance craze of the decade as creative self-expression with a sexy twist.

This chapter looks closely at what instructional guides taught about “proper” comportment at the disco, showing how the rhetoric of freedom, self-expression, and choice utilized by the disco industry furthered a very seventies sense of open-minded constructions of masculinity and femininity even as it placed limitations on those constructions—how disco style was about both freedom and limits, transgression and conformity. I begin with a discussion of the general tension between encouraging freedom and teaching specific kinds of dances and styles. This duality becomes especially apparent when exploring the role of sexuality within gender expression, and subsequent sections look at how the dance and dress of disco became a space where “traditional” and “transgressive” gender identities and sexual expressions coexisted in tension. Disco allowed masculine men to partake in activities commonly deemed “effeminate” but largely because disco style combined such acts with more “macho” expressions. Women found in disco ways by which they could combine new feminist concepts of womanhood with more traditionally feminine expression—most readily through fashion.

Finally, I should note that much of my analysis of what people learned about dressing for disco comes from *Disco Dressing: A Complete Guide for Men and Women on How to Create Seven Smash Disco Looks* by Leonard McGill, former contributing editor of *Gentleman’s Quarterly*. Because it was the only book available at the time that addressed just disco fashion—with no supplementary discussion of disco history, dances, or clubs—it makes for an interesting case study. McGill divides his observations,

research, and advice on disco styles into what he calls “seven smash disco looks”—Basic, Bodywear, Jock/Roller Disco, Thrift Shop, Rock ‘n’ Roll, Prep-Collegiate, and Futuristic—which worked for both men and women. While the mere act of categorizing looks and offering advice circumscribed any sense of *complete* freedom, the looks offered a variety of styles and a good deal of individual expression because readers could choose what look they wanted as well as how to put together an outfit that would fit that look. And while sex appeal was paramount in McGill’s understanding of disco dressing, it was only one of four factors meant to help a newcomer decide what to wear. These factors were sex appeal, comfort, visual impact, and fantasy, with people free to choose which of the four they considered most important and build an outfit from there.<sup>11</sup> This four-factor system offered men and women a sense of agency in deciding not only what to wear but what level of overt sexuality they wanted to incorporate into their dressing. They may have read that sex appeal was central in disco, but they also learned that it was possible to express it in a variety of ways.

### **Trying to Standardize Freedom**

The rise of the Hustle and instructional disco products marked the beginning of an irresolvable tension within the disco industry between an espousal of freedom of expression and the attempt to impose limitations on that expression. These products contained a strong emphasis on the fact that the disco style was about individuality, self-expression, and freedom, along with an attempt to diminish the worries neophyte dancers might have had about being on display. Not only were beginners encouraged to “dance

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<sup>11</sup> For example, McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 15, talks about this choice in relation to baggy jeans, which were popular alongside the tight, form-fitted jeans most people wore. Baggy jeans, because they fit more loosely than straight-leg jeans, tended to detract from one’s sex appeal, but that detraction was “more than made up for in comfort.” This moment is also a very rare one when McGill specifically states, “Of course, there’s no reason why you have to try to [look your sexiest]. There’s no pressure on you.”



in a way that's exclusively 'you'"; many teachers also sought to reassure their at-home audience that "no one else out there will be watching you," because "they're all really much too concerned with themselves."<sup>12</sup> Guidebooks described disco dancing as an expression of personal creativity: individuality was supposed to be the disco dancer's main concern so as to discover new freedoms of expression through disco. Some critics described this individual expression as having gone to the extreme, such as Albert Goldman, whose study of disco claimed that "the real thrust of disco culture is not toward the love of another person but toward love of self," and that "outside the entrance to every discotheque should be erected a statue to the presiding deity: Narcissus."<sup>13</sup> For Goldman, disco epitomized "Me Decade" narcissism, but the imitation and requisite basic steps involved in learning disco style (even in freestyle dancing), combined with the synchronization necessary in partner dancing, gave disco a conservative sense of conformity even while it espoused liberating self-expression. The combination of conformity and freedom meant that almost anyone could partake in and enjoy disco culture, and this tension between imposing rules and encouraging autonomy meant disco held transgressive potential even after its expansive commercialization.

One common rule offered to the disco dresser was comfort. Comfort not just in the sense that clothes should be loose enough to keep dancers cool and free to move on the dance floor (which was very important and frequently advised), but also in the sense that disco clothes should be something dancers felt comfortable wearing as an expression of themselves, or at least the selves they were choosing to portray for that evening. Bruce

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<sup>12</sup> Jane Bednar, *Everybody's Dancing in Socks and on Skates* (Mankato, Minnesota: Creative Education, 1980) 5; Bruce Pollack, *The Disco Handbook* (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1979), 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Goldman, *Disco* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1978), 11.

Pollack, author of *The Disco Handbook*, told his mostly teenage readers that “what you wear to the disco can showcase your personality,” but also that “fashion at the disco has less to do with dressing right than image-making,” reminding his readers that at the disco they were living out their fantasies.<sup>14</sup> The fantasy aspect of disco informed how these “experts” advised their “students” to dress, making it one of the most commonly offered rules that “disco clothes should never ever be the same outfit you would wear to the office.”<sup>15</sup> Separating everyday reality from disco nightlife allowed people to experiment in their outfits and their makeup. Readers were encouraged to “be a more exciting and dramatic creature at night” through make-up, creative outfits, and even costumes, but costumes were not standard.<sup>16</sup> Carter Lovisone, established dance instructor, reassured his readers that “some people dress in bizarre fashion to attract attention on the dance floor, but these form a small minority.” He made it clear that “comfort [was] keynote.”<sup>17</sup> In general, authors agreed that when at a disco, all the dancers were performers and should dress like stars of the show, learning the basic guidelines and then experimenting on their own to find ways to reflect their individual mood and essence. Indeed, the combination of freedom of expression and focus on comfort contributed to the attempt by the industry to make disco seem exotic and exciting while at the same time making it less threatening to those who just wanted to dance a simple Hustle.

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<sup>14</sup> Pollack, *Disco Handbook*, 9, 30. Kitty Hanson, *Disco Fever* (New York: New American Library, 1978) also advises, “Most important: create an image, don’t simply follow fashion” (52).

<sup>15</sup> Hanson, *Disco Fever*, 37. See also Randy Deats in collaboration with Laurie Devine, *Dancing Disco* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979), 98; Roberta Morgan, *Disco* (New York: Bell Publishing, 1979), 21; McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 1. Ronald W. Lackmann, *Disco! Disco! Disco! A Guide to Disco Dancing* (Middletown, CT: Xerox Education Publications, 1980), also advises kids that “casual clothes that are way-out and probably can’t be worn to school are perfect for the discos” (45).

<sup>16</sup> Brian Sheratt and Nalani M. Leong, *Disco Chic: All the Styles, Steps, and Places to Go* (New York: Harmony Books, 1979), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Carter Lovisone, *The Disco Hustle* (New York: Sterling, 1979), 3. Enid Nemy, “The New Discos: Life Begins at Midnight,” *New York Times*, 1 June 1977, described the fashion in the disco scene as “less costume than far-out individuality.”

This concept of choosing one's desired form of self-expression was strongest in the area of sexuality. Sexuality and sensuality could not be ignored in learning disco, but in the attempt to attract a wide audience to the scene, authors presented dances and dress options along a spectrum of (hetero)sexual expression. Whereas some believed freestyle disco ruled as a narcissistic expression of self-love, in many more instances, disco authors taught would-be dancers how to dance both freestyle and touch-dances in a sexy and sensuous way that was meant to attract attention or help dancers perform as a smooth, attractive couple on the floor. When the Hustle hit discos as the dance craze of 1975, public commentators often connected it to sex; to William Safire, it even stood in for sex. "The rise of the Hustle provides a socially acceptable way for people to get their hands on members of the opposite sex," he said. "Now people no longer have to leap into bed together to discover if they are physically compatible; they can dance together first."<sup>18</sup> Accomplished dance instructor, Dick Blake, less crude in his suggestions, taught the Hustle and other disco touch-dances in terms of sophisticated sensuality, telling his early disco students to "be sensuous in your dancing with an air of sophistication. Sexuality is in, vulgarity is out."<sup>19</sup> Later guidebook authors described the majority of dances in a similarly sexy fashion, especially in terms of the stylization tips offered.

Adult students learned that sexy hip movements were especially important in disco dancing, clearly placing disco within an era influenced by social change. "The hip moves are what give disco dancing its unique style. If you don't get your hips going, then there's no 'disco' in your dancing," claimed Karen Lustgarten, who began teaching disco dance in 1973. She offered instructions in Hip Shakes, The Sway, Scrunch Hips,

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<sup>18</sup> Safire, "On the Hustle."

<sup>19</sup> Dick Blake, *The New Disco Touch Dancing* (Cleveland Heights, OH: You, 1974), 31.

and Hip Circles, which were supposed to be “the sexiest semicircle you’ll ever draw.”<sup>20</sup> The movements had clear sexual connotations, like the Spank, which, according to Janet Jasek, needed to feature “a definite pelvic thrust” in order to be effective, and the sexy hip movements emphasized in freestyle were also an important part of the touch-dances taught.<sup>21</sup> In doing the Tango Hustle, for example, Kitty Hanson advised her readers to “think of [themselves] as Rudolph Valentino-and-friend—slinky, sensual, and sexy.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike previous dance fads in which cultural purveyors attempted to remove or tone down more lascivious aspects so as not to offend white, middle-class sensibilities, disco’s uncompromised focus on the hips highlighted its sexual nature and the ways in which those sensibilities had changed.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, authors often described certain disco steps as revised and sexier versions of social dances from decades prior such as the foxtrot, swing, and jitterbug. Lustgarten, for example, directly compared her Foot Swivels to the Charleston of the 1920s. She said, “Remember the old Charleston heel-toe side to side step? This one isn’t so different; all that’s changed is the style. Rather than danced so energetically, this one is done subtly, giving the step a sexier look.”<sup>24</sup> Authors described “the hip swaying sensuality” of dances like the Hustle as “unique creations invented by disco dancers who snubbed conventional dance standards” and often made no qualms about readily identifying the sexier aspects of these dances.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Lustgarten, *Complete Guide to Disco Dancing*, 44-62, esp. 44 and 56.

<sup>21</sup> Janet Jasek, *Disco Lovers Guide to Dance* (South Bend, IN: and books, 1978), 79.

<sup>22</sup> Hanson, *Disco Fever*, 228.

<sup>23</sup> See Nadine George-Graves, “Just Like Being at the Zoo: Primitivity and Ragtime Dance,” and Julie Malnig, “Apaches, Tangos, and Other Indecencies: Women, Dance, and New York Nightlife of the 1910s,” both in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Lustgarten, *Complete Guide to Disco Dancing*, 48.

<sup>25</sup> Hanson, *Disco Fever*, 228; Ann T. Kilbride and Angelo Algoso, *The Complete Book on Disco and Ballroom Dancing* (Los Alamitos, CA: Hwong Publishing, 1979), 119.

Sexuality was also a central and defining aspect of learning how to dress for the discotheque. Of all the various style descriptors available to choose from in disco dressing—comfortable, chic, exciting, outrageous, different, special—“sexy” was never far from the center. In discussing the new disco fashions, *Discotheekin*’ magazine said, “disco dancers have created a dress style of their own . . . sexy, wild and hot!” And President of Happy Legs, Jean Kule, said that all the company’s pants designed for dancing “are comfortable and sexy.”<sup>26</sup> Sex was central, but so was the freedom to dress in a way one felt comfortable, which not only meant a wide range of sexy styles showed up on the dance floor, but that people could take on a sexier persona in the disco than they would in their everyday lives. And as McGill made clear throughout his book, these ideas of dressing to look sexy and attractive as well as comfortable concerned men and women alike.

Only with children was the sexy nature of disco frowned upon. Understanding disco’s connection to the sexual, many adults, especially parents, were not comfortable with children being associated with the dance phenomenon. According to *The Wall Street Journal* in October 1980, jean commercials that featured children inside discos or disco dancing, one of which was taken off the air after a few months, were criticized for “propel[ling children] into adult roles prematurely.”<sup>27</sup> A parent in Chicago wrote a letter to advice columnist Dr. Joyce Brothers of the *Chicago Tribune* saying, “I see a commercial with little children using their hips in much the way sexy adult rock and disco dancers do.” The parent liked “rock and disco music and dancing, but not for

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<sup>26</sup> Mary Hilton, “Disco Fashion: Everyone a Star,” *Discotheekin*’, September 1976, 19. Kule quoted in “The Fashion Realists,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, 5 January 1978.

<sup>27</sup> Gail Bronson, “Some People Believe That Blue-Jeans Ads Are a Little Too Blue,” *Wall Street Journal*, 7 October 1980.

children.”<sup>28</sup> Such complaints show how disco was working within a society opened to certain forms of sexual expression by changes of the previous era but that still maintained certain standards of morality, “family values,” and proper sexual expression. Disco may have been a cultural form that allowed adults to experiment with new kinds of sexual freedom, but when this freedom went so far as to suggest that children should be allowed those same kinds of expressions, people spoke up. It is not a coincidence that as the “family values” debates heated up in the 1980s, disco would gradually fade.

These complaints, however, did not mean that mainstream disco culture excluded children; they just learned and participated through a more asexual sense of self-expression. There were several books written about disco specifically intended for a juvenile audience, from young children to more mature teenagers, and they taught many of the same dances that were included in the adult disco manuals. For example, Joetta Cherry and Gwynne Tomlan, professional, black actresses and proprietors of a children’s dance studio in New York, taught children how to do The Freak in their book *Disco Dancing* even though the *Chicago Tribune* described the dance as “a provocative dance in which the partners teasingly touch or rub their bodies and their partners’ bodies anywhere from head to toe as they rock or gyrate with the music. Some dancers bend their knees and swing their pelvises in a way that seems to simulate the sex act.”<sup>29</sup> When danced by adults, The Freak was so sexually suggestive that some people attributed it as the cause of three murders in Detroit early in 1979. Yet, when taught to children, it was merely an individual dance with “a frenzied look” and “never a dull moment.”<sup>30</sup> For the

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<sup>28</sup> Dr. Joyce Brothers, “Rock and Disco Dance Imitations May Be Too Adult for Children,” *Chicago Tribune*, 29 June 1982.

<sup>29</sup> Charitey Simmons, “Can Sexy Disco Dance Lead to Murder?” *Chicago Tribune*, 14 January 1979.

<sup>30</sup> Joetta Cherry and Gwynne Tomlan, *Disco Dancing* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1979), 58-59.

most part, disco guides for children were more about movement, creativity, and building confidence than they were about sex and sensuality and tried to teach children that “dancing . . . [is] a way of saying who you are and what you’re all about.”<sup>31</sup> Bruce Pollack, who readily advised the teenage audience of his book that discos served as “a handy place to mingle with the opposite sex,” did not even offer step-by-step instruction to disco dances as other books did, counseling that “in the disco you can get by just moving creatively.”<sup>32</sup> The sexy hips and sensual movements advised by adult manuals were completely absent.

While advice for kids tended to disregard the sexual elements of disco dancing, adults had a range of sexual expression presented to them in disco dance instruction. Not everything was about being a dancer who sensuously wiggled his hips, suggesting, if not simulating, sex on the dance floor. Many disco guide authors, by comparing disco to the dance routines of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers, saw the movement as much romantic as it was sexy. Indeed, most books combined very sexy dances with those that were more fun or romantic. For example, *The Complete Book on Disco and Ballroom Dancing* included instructions on The Two-Step Hustle, described innocently as “a favorite among disco fans who revel in a fast, bouncy dancing style” as well as a chapter on “Disco Body Dances,” which emphasized that “sensual hip movement is the single most important ingredient that separates hot from lukewarm disco body dancers.” The same book had instruction in “Slow Disco,” which was both sexy and romantic in one: “When you long to melt into your lover’s arms, that’s the perfect time to try some SLOW DISCO. Nothing, but nothing, could be more romantic than swaying to a heart throbbing disco

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<sup>31</sup> Bednar, *Everybody’s Dancing*, 12, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Pollack, *Disco Handbook*, 2, 27.

song.” The authors also described this swaying as “sensuous” and “elegant and exquisitely sexy.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, dancers could do the Rock—an easily adaptable freestyle step—alone, with a partner “for some slightly sexy movements,” or as a line dance coordinating steps with an entire group. According to television dance instructor Randy Deats, “Some couples dance it sinfully close, and others dress it up with some of the simple Rope Hustle turns. Anything goes.”<sup>34</sup> With this varied a combination of expressions at their disposal, dancers learned that they were free to dictate their own level of sexy display on the disco dance floor. Disco dancing could open the door to a form of public sexual expression for those who desired it but could also be toned down for those who remained intimidated by the new sexual openness of society.

In terms of sexual suggestion, dancers could even put their own individual interpretation on one of the sexiest disco dances. The Freak was a controversial dance some believed to instigate violence, but the *Chicago Tribune* explained that

when it comes to freaking, people do have their own codes.

“I don’t let him touch me,” said Betty Hall, a biology major at Northern Illinois University. “I keep my hands to myself. He can just Freak on himself.”

“Some guys do get carried away,” [Gwendolyn] Gill said. “They walk up to you and start freaking. I’ll walk it off and start freaking on myself.”

. . . . Patrice Brownlee isn’t rattled by all the touching, even when she’s dancing with someone she doesn’t know.

“It doesn’t bother me ‘cause we’re just dancing,” she said.

Detroit Councilman and pastor, Nicholas Hood claimed he had “never seen anything as lewd or immoral” as the Freak and asked the city attorney if the dance could be banned. The article, however, explained that the Councilman had “taken some ribbing over his views, which seem prudish and outmoded for these times when just about everything

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<sup>33</sup> Kilbride and Algozo, *Complete Book on Disco*, 112, 165, 149-163.

<sup>34</sup> Deats, *Dancing Disco*, 86.



seems to go.”<sup>35</sup> Those involved in the disco scene were open to the notion that people should be free to make their own sexual choices and not have morality dictated to them.

Authors encouraged their disco students to find their own individual sexiness—disco was about self-expression, after all. But they also encouraged students to contain this sexual self-expression to what was attractive and “appropriate” to a larger audience—encouraging a liberated sexuality, but one that was limited by the opinion of others. For example, Hanson reminded would-be discoers that dance experts advised students to “suit the movement to your own style and personality” but to be conscious of how they would look: “What looks cute and sexy when a slim young thing does it can look crude and vulgar when an older person performs the same movement to the same degree. Do it, by all means do it. But don’t *overdo* it.”<sup>36</sup> Mainstream disco was meant to be sexy, but it was supposed to be a sort of sophisticated sexuality—one in which a variety of people could be involved, from youthful singles to married, middle-aged couples. And by making disco an area of performance that included a variety of sexual expression, it became popular with a wide range of people. Disco became the social dance form of mainstream America in an era of overt and public sex, making respectable social dance more overtly sexual—and yet also more versatile—than what came before.

Yet, as much as guidebooks presented disco as individual creativity and self-expression, they simultaneously portrayed it as an exercise in conformity and self-discipline, a blatant complication of the Me-Decade stereotype. Eager students learned that “the nice thing about disco dancing is that ‘anything goes,’” but they were also

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<sup>35</sup> Simmons, “Can Sexy Disco Dance Lead to Murder?”

<sup>36</sup> Hanson, *Disco Fever*, 205

consistently reminded that “discipline must always come before freedom.”<sup>37</sup> Creating one’s own unique style was part of what made disco appealing, but learning the standardized basic steps became a prerequisite to individual expression. It seems curiously contradictory that so many people were supposedly learning to express *themselves* through disco dancing in an effort merely to become the next John Travolta or Karen Lynn Gorney. And as much as the sexuality of disco made it an arena for self-expression, it also made it one in which the tensions and limitations of the disco mainstream were most evident.

One of the most obvious limitations was that the kinds of dances taught suggested a heteronormative standard in mainstream disco, with only rare and small openings for non-hetero expression. According to a common dance guide trope that understood disco dancing as a form of social dance that brought back touch-dancing, performed in close contact with a partner, the Hustle overtook the Bump as the dominant disco dance craze, in part, because it was a dance performed in heterosexual partnership, unlike the more ambiguous Bump, which, according to *Esquire*, “avid dancers . . . say you can’t dance if you are white and straight.”<sup>38</sup> The Hustle, in various permutations, remained the definitive disco partner dance, and a few dance guides taught touch-dance exclusively.<sup>39</sup>

Others claimed that learning to dance with a partner was more satisfying than freestyle

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<sup>37</sup>Jerolyn Ann Nentl, *Disco Dancing* (Mankato, MN: Crestwood House, 1980), 22; Villari and Villari, *Official Guide to Disco*, unpaginated Introduction.

<sup>38</sup>Dunham, “How to Hustle Without Hassle”; “America Dances,” *Esquire*, December 1974, 113. As a dance, the Bump involved partners touching various body parts together in time with the music’s beat.

<sup>39</sup>Barbara Molotsky, “Disco Fever: Dance Floors Have the Hottest Show in Town,” *Chicago Tribune*, 27 October 1978. Also see Fallon, *Art of Disco Dancing*, 6. Robert Ford, “Disco Steps Add Spring to Schools,” *Billboard*, 27 May, 1978, reported that “School operators all say the great bulk of their new students are between the ages of 21 and 35 and almost everyone wants to learn the hustle,” clearly suggesting that the hustle was the dance that most people identified with disco. Guides that taught touch dance exclusively include Blake, *New Disco Touch Dancing* and Lovisone, *The Disco Hustle*.

while providing the same freedom of expression and movement.<sup>40</sup> And while authors may not have explicitly expressed this partnership as a heterosexual one, the images included in these guides, without exception, were of male-female couples, separating this kind of disco dancing from that of gay bars and clubs.

In learning the Hustle, dancers also learned about leading and following, a historically gendered designation and an area in which promoters of disco in the mainstream remained decidedly ambivalent concerning the changing social roles for men and women during the previous several years. In more cases than not, authors of dance manuals did not explicitly address the subject, either assuming that a male lead was understood as it had been in ballroom dance for centuries or hoping that people would pick up on that designation with illustrations that clearly spelled out male and female steps. Or, perhaps choosing not to make a distinction to allow consumers to express gender roles as they saw fit. Most likely, it was one of the former possibilities. In several cases, however, authors of dance manuals made it explicitly clear that men were the leaders in the new touch-dances. For long-time dance instructors like Dick Blake, men and women had clear roles to play on the dance floor, even if women were changing American society in very noticeable ways beyond the disco: he reminded his students that “the gentleman leads on the dance floor...maybe not in life but he does on the dance floor.”<sup>41</sup> Blake’s instruction manual was one of the first to recognize disco’s role in the reintroduction of touch-dancing, published the year before “The Hustle” hit the top of the charts. But among the slew of disco dance manuals that hit the shelves in the wake of

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<sup>40</sup> The idea that couple dancing was more satisfying but still free comes from *Let’s Disco*, 43; Fallon, *Art of Disco Dancing*, 30; and Villari and Villari, *Official Guide to Disco*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Blake, *New Disco Touch Dancing*, 31.

*Saturday Night Fever*, there were certain authors who also explicitly mentioned that “it must be clearly understood that the man leads and the woman follows.”<sup>42</sup>

Nonetheless, just as many, if not more, dance manuals were explicit about the fact that in the modern era of disco touch-dance, men were no longer obligated to lead and dancing women “no longer obliged to follow in the two left footsteps of a non-dancing male.”<sup>43</sup> Partly because of the freeform nature of disco touch-dance, which included spins, twirls, and turns for both lead and follow, guidebook authors told couples that they were free to designate a leader based on individual skill level. Dancing partners could also choose to alternate leadership.<sup>44</sup> Manuals still taught the dances in terms of male leads, however, so comments like these were also a reflection of the shifting roles of women beyond the dance arena. “This book has no intention of telling you who should lead and who should follow,” wrote Roy Madrid, who helped teach John Travolta the couples dances for *Saturday Night Fever*. “Traditionally the male assumes the leadership role and the female the follower,” he continued, “But should you have strong feelings, one way or the other, you can alter this.”<sup>45</sup> The tone of his disclaimer suggests that it is less the nature of disco dancing itself that has altered tradition and more the ideas of a changing American society. Ultimately, instructed Madrid, the stronger of the two should be the leader (which, he points out, will most often be the male).<sup>46</sup> Leaving the option for women to lead instead of men is one way in which these authors

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<sup>42</sup> Fallon, *Art of Disco Dancing*, 14. See also Lovisone, *The Disco Hustle*, who insists that “When it comes to partner dancing, the man’s job is the more demanding. . . . It is the man’s responsibility to lead his partner” among other things (4). Villari and Villari, *The Official Guide to Disco*, also make it clear that “it is necessary for the man especially to give his partner extra support on some dance moves” (50).

<sup>43</sup> Lustgarten, *Complete Guide to Disco Dancing*, 92-93.

<sup>44</sup> Lani van Ryzin, *Disco* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1979), 13; Nancy P. Bruning, *The Kids’ Book of Disco* (New York: Dell, 1979), 69.

<sup>45</sup> Roy Madrid, *Disco . . . You Should Be Dancing* (Los Angeles: Multi-Media Marketing, 1978), 24.

<sup>46</sup> Madrid, *You Should Be Dancing*, 26.

acknowledged the changing world of which the disco phenomenon was a part. By doing so, in direct conflict with others who still claimed a strict male lead, they allowed the modern confusion of gender roles and ideas of gender equality to seep onto the dance floor, teaching dancers that disco was a realm in which participants, through their dancing, played out the tensions of larger society.

Yet, while the confusion of who should lead and who should follow left openings for heterosexual couples to break with tradition, gay couples were still generally unacceptable on the mainstream disco dance floor, according to the dance manuals. The only exception to this rule came early on in disco's mainstream popularity when, in August 1975, *Rolling Stone* published instructions on how to do the New York Hustle. While illustrating the steps with a heterosexual couple, the magazine talked about the Social Dance Position involving "the man and woman (or any modern combination)."<sup>47</sup> In the books published after *Saturday Night Fever* launched the disco explosion, pictures were always of a male and a female together in touch-dances and a single male or single female in freestyle. Only in line dances—where all dancers perform the same steps without touching and there is no lead or follow—were two or more males or two or more females pictured without members of the opposite sex. But even these steps were most often illustrated with either a single person or one male with one female.<sup>48</sup>

While some dance guides highlighted touch-dancing, and the press often reported that either freestyle or touch-dance dominated at any given time in any given region, the two forms always co-existed on the disco dance floor. Most dance guides offered

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<sup>47</sup> "The New York Hustle: At Last, a Perfect Anthem for the Five Boroughs," *Rolling Stone*, 28 August 1975, 44. Reprinted with the same title and accredited to Karen Lustgarten and Ralph Lew in *Dancing Madness*, ed. Abe Peck and Suzy Rice (New York: Anchor Press, 1976), 35-36.

<sup>48</sup> The few line dance exceptions include Wilson, *Dance Dance Dance*, 26-29 and Kilbride and Algosio, *Complete Book on Disco*, 189.

instruction in both. Indeed, some authors considered freestyle dancing more important and representative of the disco spirit than touch-dance, and by doing so, opened room for freedom of expression that could upset the attempt at industry standardization. Albert Goldman, who claimed Narcissus as disco's presiding deity, best expressed this idea:

The idea that disco has been built on a revival of 'touch dancing' . . . or that it is focused on a step called the Latin Hustle is either wishful thinking by Arthur Murray instructors or just bad women's-page journalism. The truth is that today's hip disco dancer is into the kind of one-man show that John Travolta puts on in the most exciting sequences of *Saturday Night Fever*: a scene that speaks the truth despite itself. It unwittingly demonstrates how totally fulfilling it is to dance alone and how frustrating and infuriating it is to have to work out something as intimate as the way you dance with some cranky bitch.<sup>49</sup>

Misogyny aside, Goldman hits upon many of the concepts that described the disco craze—the oftentimes narcissistic performance of one's chosen identity in order to gain admiration on the floor. In his attempt to argue for the extreme narcissism of disco, Goldman ignores the fact that some people preferred the shared pursuit of touch-dancing, claiming it allowed for the same kind of exhibitionism and held more meaning because it was done with someone else.<sup>50</sup> But other authors and instructors agreed with Goldman, if to less of an extreme, that disco was more about the do-your-own-thing concept of freestyle rather than touch-dancing. Hanson and Lustgarten both defined disco dancing as freestyle, yet they acknowledged the simultaneous popularity of touch-dance and offered instruction in both. To them, disco dancing was a “form of dance totally divorced from the discipline of the Hustle, yet completely at home with it on the disco floor.”<sup>51</sup>

That these authors deemed freestyle the most important aspect of disco dancing is significant because it left open the possibility for expressions on the dance floor that did

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<sup>49</sup> Goldman, *Disco*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> See Andrew Kopkind, “The Dialectic of Disco: Gay Music Goes Straight,” *Village Voice*, 12 February 1979, 25.

<sup>51</sup> Hanson, *Disco Fever*, 199.

not necessarily fit into a heterosexual mold. But these authors also gave clear instruction in both freestyle steps and touch-dance routines, thereby limiting the assumption of complete freedom involved in disco dancing and somewhat undermining the non-hetero possibilities, especially when the touch-dance illustrations always depicted only heterosexual couples.

The standard combination of freestyle and line dances with touch-dance instruction was about combining dances made up of intricate steps with those that required nearly none in order to draw as wide an audience as possible to the discos. But books often suggested that even freestyle disco dancing was meant to be performed with a partner. In her book on the disco craze, for example, Hanson cites instructions from John Monte, National Dance Director of the Fred Astaire Dance Studios, who talked about disco dancing in terms of partners dancing in the “apart” position. By also quoting sociologist Dr. Amitai Etzioni of Columbia University, who said one reason for the popularity of disco is that “you don’t have to have a partner,” Hanson shows just how much disco dancing was open to interpretation.<sup>52</sup> On the opposite extreme, however, Dennis Fallon, Associate Professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, writes in his book aimed at teaching dance instructors how to teach disco dance, “Although in free style partners do not touch each other, they should dance with each other and complement their partner’s dancing . . . . This conscious relationship with the partner is fundamental to free style dancing.”<sup>53</sup> The idea proposed by some that one needed a partner to “properly” participate in disco dancing further limited the supposed individual

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 200-201, 60.

<sup>53</sup> Fallon, *Art of Disco Dancing*, 135-136.

freedom of mainstream disco and separated it from the mass of unattached dancers that went out to gay and black clubs in disco's early years.

Adding to the heteronormative nature of instructional disco products, most books readily suggested that a standout performance on the disco floor was a good opportunity to meet new people, bond with your lover, and attract a special someone, most often of the opposite sex. These appealing concepts encouraged people to purchase book(s) or take lessons because they suggested that as long as someone learned how to disco dance, his or her romantic life would improve, but such a focus made disco in the mainstream most centrally about heterosexual partnering and more about sophisticated sexuality than raw sexual expression, thereby limiting its liberating potential. The most extreme case of this connection between learning to disco dance and success in the heterosexual dating pool was Roy Madrid's book, *Disco . . . You Should Be Dancing*.

More than just a dance manual, Madrid's book reads like a pseudo dating manual. Before even getting to the dance instruction, it has an entire section on how disco will help one look good and gain confidence, including a segment entitled "The Opposite Sex—The Disco Dance Score." Madrid starts his dance manual with an introduction describing a character he names "Dopey Debbie." Dopey Debbie is "in the prime of her dating and dancing life yet, every Friday and Saturday night she sits at home . . . alone." She has slouchy posture, frumpy clothes, and a negative attitude. No one notices her when she walks down the street. But with the help of disco, Dopey Debbie transforms into "Dynamite Disco-quette" who is confident and happy and "can enter the most popular discotheque in town with her head held high and her feet as light and as airy as if she were walking on stardust." Madrid draws in his readers, promising "a richer, fuller



life through disco” and peppers his dance advice and instructions with humorously sexual innuendos, suggesting that properly performing in the disco environment will improve one’s dating life and interactions with the opposite sex.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, failing in this respect—not performing properly in the disco scene—could hamper one’s chances with that desired partner. Madrid further separates himself from homosexual expression when he explains, “If you are having a party and you have an uneven number of men and women, the Line Hustle is the perfect solution to what could be an awkward social problem, because no one takes partners during the Line Hustle.”<sup>55</sup> For Madrid, disco was a completely heterosexual activity. Not even with his lighthearted and humorous tone would he consider the possibility that men could dance with men or women with women, or that gay men or lesbians might be hosting a disco party where an uneven ratio of male to female partners would be ideal. He wrote his book for the straight, single and youthful in America’s mainstream who had come to disco since the success of *Saturday Night Fever*, many of whom may not have been aware of or willing to acknowledge the gay origins of the entertainment craze.

A similar heterosexual bias riddled the instructions offered on how to dress for the discotheque and contributed to an attempt to set standards on an exercise in which “the only fashion rule . . . is not to follow any rule.”<sup>56</sup> Dressing in the discotheque was an important skill to have, and, as with dancing, it helped in expressing one’s individuality because of the sense of freedom involved. But not everything was appropriate for the disco scene, and the various “Disco Dressing” sections within instructional guides helped

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<sup>54</sup> Madrid, “Introduction,” in *You Should be Dancing*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>56</sup> Van Ryzin, *Disco*, 48. Ironically, she follows this claim of no rules with four categories of disco trends.

would-be disco-goers in their quest for stardom, attention, and individual expression on the dance floor. Indeed, like dancing, there was an interesting incongruity to these manuals in that within their pages, disco dressing was about creative self-expression and freedom but there were certain guidelines that needed to be followed and “a few general categories of outfits” into which most disco styles fell.<sup>57</sup> Dressing for the disco was an act of freedom in which *complete* freedom was rarely advised, an expression of individuality bounded by a sense of conformity to popular and expected trends.

If nothing else, guidebooks advised that one dress to get attention—and a partner—on the dance floor. As Leonard McGill counseled:

Let’s face it, if you’re not with a date, you’re going to have to find somebody to dance with. Whether you’re the one asking or the one being asked, it’s going to be easier the better you feel about yourself. Looking good helps. Even if you’re with a date, wife or husband, you don’t want to look blah next to other people, right? Well, your clothes are one way to make sure you don’t.<sup>58</sup>

Because of the heteronormative and partner-conscious tendencies of mainstream disco, guidebook authors suggested that one’s clothes, as well as one’s dancing, were a great way to gain confidence. But the way to have that confidence was to feel as if you stood out from the crowd, or at least were dressed up and looking your best. Indeed, manuals often conveyed that as the only way a patron would meet anyone special, especially in disco’s visually oriented environment.<sup>59</sup> Accomplished writer Roberta Morgan, who

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted phrase from Van Ryzin, *Disco*, 48. Van Ryzin described these categories as “glimmer and shimmer outfits, the dated look, costumes, and whatever is in” and goes on to describe them on pages 48-51. Other books that explicitly divided fashion into categories of outfits include Hanson, *Disco Fever*, 38-45 and McGill, *Disco Dressing*. Morgan, *Disco*, 24, advised people to be trendsetters in their fashions, but “If you can’t get in step notice what other dancers are wearing. And if all else fails, try to copy their outfits,” thereby mixing individual expression with conformity. Some books did the same with dancing, advising that beginners could become more “creative” by copying the steps of more advanced dancers.

<sup>58</sup> McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Fashion designer, Betsey Johnson said, in Leonard McGill, *Disco Dressing*, “Nowadays, people don’t have time to get to know someone, so they have to judge them by the way they look. . . . I wouldn’t approach a person I didn’t find visually exciting” (3).

published *Disco* around the same time as her best-selling profile of professional wrestling, told her readers, “Choose whatever makes you feel and look like a beautiful person” after explaining that “the disco scene . . . is not for the casual or poor dresser—it is for those who want to feel glamorous, look attractive and act like beautiful people.”<sup>60</sup> A dancer no longer had to be a beautiful person to participate in the disco scene, he or she just had to feel and act like one. The way a disco patron dressed was one way to get that feeling, and it did not hurt that it might also help in meeting a potential someone.

Instructional products taught disco in a way that limited it to a traditional heteronormative formation, but they did so with a somewhat ambiguous relation to the growing sexual openness of American society. Even if producers of mainstream disco’s instructional guides removed the general possibility of homosexual expression, the range of sexual expressiveness included was a way for Americans to come to terms with the new sexual openness of a society in the wake of sexual revolution. As explained in *Disco Lovers Guide to Dance*, “By far, the most complex psychological problem for all beginners in Disco Dancing is in the arena of dissolving pre-conditioned inhibitions against public body movement.”<sup>61</sup> Combined with the self-expression central to disco, dancers were encouraged to “be loose, free, creative, wild, sexy, unabashed—anything but reserved.”<sup>62</sup> And this new form of uninhibited body movement was something that dancers of any gender had to learn. Indeed, while the sexual awareness of the decade

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<sup>60</sup> Morgan, *Disco*, 24, 21. Morgan wrote for a range of magazines and newspapers and would go on to publish many more books. She is perhaps best known for *Main Event: The World of Professional Wrestling* (New York: Dial Press, 1979).

<sup>61</sup> Jasek, *Disco Lovers Guide to Dance*, 23. Wilson, *Dance Dance Dance*, 5, also talks about how learning to enjoy disco dancing requires one to forget all inhibitions. Neither author specifically discusses this as an issue of sexuality, but considering the historical context, such an interpretation makes sense. And Jasek’s discussion of it as a personal aspect of disco dancing that “can only be developed internally, by yourself, individually, and in your own personal way” fits well with the feminist idea that sexuality is highly personal and individually determined.

<sup>62</sup> Sheratt and Leong, *Disco Chic*, 107.

may have been especially important to women who were demanding to own their sexuality for the first time, men also needed to come to terms with the tensions of this new sexual landscape—one way to do that was through disco.

### **New Measures of Masculinity**

In the disco era, dancing ability became an acceptable measure of masculinity for those men involved in the scene, making significant (if temporary and incomplete) strides to remove the stigma of “less than masculine” from dancing men. Dance history scholar, Ramsay Burt has pointed out that “Professional dance during approximately the last hundred and fifty years has not been considered an appropriate activity for white men to engage in,” which he argues stems from our culture’s historic unease with male, rather than female, bodies on display.<sup>63</sup> Dance scholars Jennifer Fischer and Anthony Shay found the impetus for their edited collection, *When Men Dance*, in the troubled but underexplored relationship between dance and masculinity. Their introduction spells out how the construction of dance as feminine or homosexual varies based on culture and era, but in Western cultures since at least the early twentieth century, a combination of homophobia and fear of effeminacy contributed to a tendency to treat male dancers as possessing suspect masculinity. In their volume, this uncertain relationship applies to all forms of dance, including social dance (even though the essays deal mostly with concert

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<sup>63</sup> Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacles, Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1. Laura Mulvey remains a foundational, if problematic, scholar in this idea of female “to-be-looked-at-ness” and male dominance and action—the idea that the gaze is assumed male and therefore sets up to eroticize women rather than men. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18. For an example of attempts to complicate Mulvey’s thesis see the essays in Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, eds., *The Female Gaze: Woman as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: The Women’s Press, 1988). The arguments in this collection about how the female and gay male gaze eroticizes men, helping to legitimize displays of the masculine body in light of feminist and gay liberation politics, remain significant for my discussion of male dressing below. See especially Suzanne Moore, “Here’s Looking at You, Kid!”

dance).<sup>64</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when rock valorized listening over dancing and the only bodies on display among arena rock crowds were those of the performers projecting a powerful masculinity through a collection of free-form jerks and jumps, dominant white society devalued men who put themselves on display through graceful, formulated, and skilled dance moves, as disco expected of its participants. The correlation between dancing men, effeminacy, and homophobia would eventually contribute to the demise of the disco craze as the disco sucks movement attacked even John Travolta's heterosexuality and masculinity, but as disco became a popular pastime with mainstream America, skillful disco dancing and confident masculinity often went hand in hand.

Especially after mainstream audiences took up Travolta's dancing in *Saturday Night Fever* as the source of his worth in a world that otherwise cut him down, skilled disco dancing became an acceptably masculine, if fear-inducing, activity for men for whom "the mere thought of dance lessons conjured up long-repressed childhood fears of a time when dancing was for sissies and dancing school meant seemingly interminable nights of indentured humiliation."<sup>65</sup> The dance manuals of accomplished dancer and choreographer Dick Blake are illustrative in this regard. In 1965, Blake published *Discothèque Dances*, which taught popular dances of the 1960s such as the Jerk, Frug, and Watusi. *Discothèque Dances* also included a brief piece "About Dick Blake," which described not only Blake's accomplishments in dance and performance, but also the fact that he is "strong and virile" with a "natural flair for athletics." According to this piece,

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<sup>64</sup> Jennifer Fischer and Anthony Shay, eds., *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> John Rabb, "How I Stopped Feeling Guilty, Started Jiving, and Got Down to Gyration and Grooving on the Hardwood," *Washington Post*, 4 August 1978.

“The strong, masculine picture that he presents is, in fact, somewhat incongruous with his speed, grace, and agility.”<sup>66</sup> In 1965, it was not enough for Blake to be an agile and graceful dancer; he had to compensate for these questionably masculine traits by offering other athletically oriented achievements in order to defend his masculinity and reinforce his authority to teach other men to dance.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, the description of Dick Blake that appeared in his 1974 manual, *The New Disco Touch Dancing*, does not talk about his sporting accomplishments or his physical strength and virility. In the 1970s, Blake no longer needed to compensate with other “more masculine” traits; he could be an accomplished man of the arts, from dance and theater to radio and television, and still be acceptably masculine.

Yet, Blake was not open to a completely androgynous understanding of the male dancer, and thus placed limits on the freedom of masculine expression in dance. Blake taught men that “gentlemen should dance with a firm lead,” and because this was a way for men to prove their masculinity, he advised women to “follow the gentlemen’s lead and subdue their own abilities of dance if their knowledge is greater than their partner’s so as not to cause embarrassment.”<sup>68</sup> In the 1970s, with the reintroduction of touch-dance, one way men could prove their masculinity was through their dancing ability, even if only in the role of strong and competent leading dancers. While leading was not necessarily masculine-defined in the gender-confused age of the 1970s, a story in the

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<sup>66</sup> Tony Lolli, “About Dick Blake,” in Dick Blake, *Discothèque Dances: Teach Yourself the Newest Dances* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1965), 2. Lolli’s position as the Producer-Director of Sports Network Inc. probably lead to the focus on sports in his description of Blake, but the fact that he sees his sports image as strong and masculine and incongruous with his dance image, suggests that it can stand as a more general comment on masculinity in the 1960s.

<sup>67</sup> The correlation of dancing to sport so as to validate it as acceptable activity for men is explored more fully by Maura Keefe, “Is Dance a Man’s Sport Too? The Performance of Athletic-Coded Masculinity on the Concert Dance Stage,” in *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*, eds. Jennifer Fischer and Anthony Shay (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 91-106.

<sup>68</sup> Blake, *New Disco Touch Dancing*, 1, 32, 31.

*New York Times* underpins the fact that most men considered it an important part of their dancing persona. In 1976, as a string of new discos opened on Long Island, a young man asked a woman to dance at the Decameron.

‘I’d like to,’ she said, ‘but I’m not really very good.’

‘That’s okay,’ the man said, ‘I’ll teach you to hustle.’

He tried to teach her a few basic steps, but he couldn’t get her to spin marionette-like on the parquet floors. Obviously self-conscious about his image on the dance floor, the young man leaned over and whispered: ‘I think we’d better stop. I don’t want to embarrass you anymore.’<sup>69</sup>

The young man may have told the woman that he did not want to embarrass her, but he was just as concerned with his own image and about embarrassing himself. He could not get her to “spin marionette-like,” which to onlookers would suggest a weakness in his leading ability, and therefore a flaw in his masculinity. The woman was able to “laugh the whole thing off,” acknowledging that she did not know what she was doing well enough to be the star of the show. But the man was “obviously self-conscious” knowing that within the walls of the discotheque his masculinity was on the line if he could not prove his dancing prowess and strong leading ability.

Having seen John Travolta strut his stuff as the star of *Saturday Night Fever*, the whole of mainstream America was let in on this secret that being a good dancer could be masculine—and sexy too. Men, who once viewed dancing as incongruous with strength and masculinity, suddenly wanted to dance like John Travolta and women wanted to find these suave dancing men: “*Saturday Night Fever*...not only catapulted its star, John Travolta, onto the cover of *Time* as the new Fred Astaire of the Bump, it also launched a million young men into Travolta impersonations. And sent several million young women

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<sup>69</sup> Ari L. Goldman, “A New Look For the Disco,” *New York Times*, 26 December 1976.

in pursuit of this new *imago-man*: the swivel-hipped, silk-suited dancing stud.”<sup>70</sup>

Travolta himself explained the appeal to *Playboy*: “I think that I’ve allowed men to feel free. My character, Tony, was sort of that down-to-earth *macho* straightforward guy . . . . It was important that he was dancing. There was nothing unmasculine about it. It was like a sport. And it had romance in it, it had sex in it. It was sexy to watch [emphasis in original].”<sup>71</sup> To him, disco dancing was both romantic and sexy, and that made it no less masculine. And while he felt the need to liken dancing to a sport in order to defend its masculine quality, he saw that defining dance as a masculine activity would allow for greater freedom of expression for many men. Viewers of *Saturday Night Fever* learned that being a good dancer made them masculine and sexy and attractive to women who were also learning how to be comfortable with their sexuality on the disco dance floor.

In order to achieve the sexiness of a Travolta-like dancer, however, men had to learn how to dance, which was a scary prospect for many men who had come to embrace the commonly accepted typicality that “women generally find it easier to flow with the music, while men may have to work a little harder to ‘get loose,’ as the saying goes.”<sup>72</sup> Because formulated dancing had been such an unpopular activity for many men in the years preceding disco, the idea that they would have to learn how to dance in order to attract the opposite sex could be disturbing—and they feared they would never be as sexy or talented as Travolta. Indeed, many men shied away from—and would eventually rebel

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<sup>70</sup> Cunningham, “Discorama,” *Cosmopolitan*, September 1978, 223.

<sup>71</sup> *Playboy* Interview: John Travolta, *Playboy*, December 1978, 106.

<sup>72</sup> Morgan, *Disco*, 49. See also Fallon, *Art of Disco Dancing*, 30 and Jim Sanderson, “The Trauma of Disco Mania,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 August 1979, who make similar claims. Rhoda Koenig, “How to Dance Like John Travolta, Should the Need Arise,” *New York*, 16 January 1978, 34, provides statistics claiming, “Ninety-seven percent of all women can dance or at least look at ease on the floor. No one knows why this is. It has nothing to do with training; it’s genetic, a fact of nature. If you’re a man, you’ve got a lot tougher row to hoe.”



against—disco precisely because it required them to learn dance steps. “I like rock and roll because you don’t have to learn any new steps to dance to it,” said AOR radio DJ, Lobster Wells.<sup>73</sup> Disco challenged this complacency on the part of masculine rockers who resented the need to learn new dance steps in order to prove their desirability as masculine men. Moreover, disco’s rhythm was a smooth sexual rhythm—a “whole body eroticism,” as Richard Dyer once described it—that differed from the more phallogentric jerks of rock music.<sup>74</sup>

Social scientist and consultant to Burkhart/Abrams radio managers, Dr. John Parikhhal, made the startlingly prescient argument in June 1979, that disco’s smooth sexual rhythm would experience widespread rejection by teenage boys because rock music was “aimed at young men who are afraid of sex,” its violent sexual rhythm used to express the frustrations of men uncomfortable expressing their sexuality in anything but a phallic sense, afraid they would not be able to measure up to new sexual expectations.<sup>75</sup> Disco, by comparison, expected new kinds of sexual expression, which scared some men while encouraging others. Jim Sanderson sympathized with the male readers of the *Los Angeles Times*: “I tell you, many a man and boy watched that movie ‘Saturday Night Fever’ with queasy foreboding. Was *this* the new kind of dancing that a male had to

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<sup>73</sup> As quoted in Noe Goldwasser, “Disco Puts Radio through Changes: AOR Holds the Line,” *Record World*, 3 February 1979, 21.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Dyer, “In Defence of Disco,” in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (1979, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 407-415. Also see Simon Frith’s discussion of Dyer in *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 246, and Goldman’s description of rock music in *Disco*, 104.

<sup>75</sup> For reports on Parikhhal’s theory, see Doug Hall, “Sex Rhythm Spurs Disco Pull? So Say Sociologists at Burkhart/Abrams Conference,” *Billboard*, 2 June 1979; Carl Philip Snyder, “The Year In Music,” *Playboy*, April 1980; and Radcliffe A. Joe, *This Business of Disco* (New York: Billboard Books, 1980), 187. Parikhhal’s observation was a contributing factor in the anti-disco promotional campaigns of 1979s that Burkhart/Abrams encouraged many of their rock radio stations to adapt. See Frank Rose, “Discophobia: Rock & Roll Fights Back,” *Village Voice*, 12 November 1979.

learn before he could get a female nodding yes?”<sup>76</sup> With this comment, Sanderson recognized that disco was a kind of dance that one needed to learn, but noting that it had to be learned in order to “get a female nodding yes” shows that he and other men were willing to become skilled at disco dancing because they expected it would attract women into bed with them. And though the prospect of learning to dance was scary, the fear that they would not be able to live up to the sexy standard set by Travolta was recognition that dancing had, in fact, become an accepted measure of masculinity—masculinity in terms of what the opposite sex would be attracted to, but masculinity nonetheless.

Because dancing had become a newly accepted measure of masculinity, many men flocked to the dance floors and became active participants and students in a subject they had once avoided. Jack Alix, who staged Travolta Look-Alike Contests across the country, claimed, “a couple of years ago you couldn’t *get* guys on the dance floor alone . . . Now they’re pushing and shoving to get out there.”<sup>77</sup> Dancing ability had become central to masculine ideals of the disco movement, and the abundance of disco dance lessons and manuals that appeared in the wake of *Saturday Night Fever* were especially important for those men who wanted to become involved, teaching them about sexual and gender expression along with dance steps. Disco guides encouraged men and women equally to incorporate a little sexiness into their disco dancing, tending not to make any sort of distinction about which gender they were addressing beyond the designation of lead and follow.<sup>78</sup> The stylization techniques and tips that told dancers to shake their hips and move sensuously across the floor were almost always addressed to the general

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<sup>76</sup> Jim Sanderson, “The Trauma of Disco Mania,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 August 1979.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Up Front, “Travolta Impersonators,” *People*, 24 April 1978, 34.

<sup>78</sup> Only in one instance, in a book where it was simply understood that men were the leaders, was it specified that a specific move (the death drop) required a “Herculean man” and “demanded a partner whose machismo is equal to his prowess.” Kilbride and Algosio, *Complete Book on Disco*, 163, 59.

reader—"you"—gender unknown, so men and women had the same spectrum of sexiness on which to find their proper place.

Because of this self-definition of sexual expression, men could approach their dancing in a variety of ways. They could believe John Travolta when he told *Playboy* that the sense of sexual power in dancing comes from confidence in one's ability: "It's an air, the ability or the confidence a person has when he has talent, and sometimes it's sexy. Yet he's not being self-conscious of the sexuality in it."<sup>79</sup> In this sense, the dancer would not necessarily feel the need to overemphasize the display of sexuality in his movements. Or, he could agree with the comment of one contestant in a John Travolta Look-Alike Contest: "Girls want you to shake your hips."<sup>80</sup> Considering that a girl on the sidelines breathed, "I want to make love to him," this talented but self-consciously sexy hip shaking might have been the way to go for other men. Still more might have found themselves somewhere in the middle because even if they failed in their quest to master the sexy Travolta steps, they still wanted to be out in the disco scene. One *Washington Post* columnist found that "coupling what little [he] learned at the dance school with a festering case of 'Night Fever,' [he was] able to stay alive in Washington's 'disco inferno' and encounter romance and adventure in the process."<sup>81</sup> The sexual expression of disco dancing required more of men than the limited steps of rock, but in propounding the liberated sense of individuality of 1970s society, it ultimately made a variety of masculine expression viable.

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<sup>79</sup> Playboy Interview: John Travolta, *Playboy*, December 1978, 106.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Up Front, "Travolta Impersonators," *People*, 24 April 1978, 35.

<sup>81</sup> Rabb, "How I Stopped Feeling Guilty."

Beyond dealing with heightened expectations on the dance floor, those men who watched Tony Manero primp and preen in front of the mirror, cover over his hair or clothes getting mussed, and spend his hard-earned money on fancy suits and brightly colored shirts and pants for his Saturday nights at 2001 Odyssey, learned that dressing properly was an important part of the disco scene. The variety of clothing options put forth by the disco industry offered another avenue through which men could define an individual and unique masculine persona, but not without tension and uncertainty. The new expressiveness of male fashion, played out to the extreme in the discotheque, was one way in which society used culture to play out the tensions resultant from its transforming ideas of gender. As designer Yves St. Laurent explained to *Women's Wear Daily*, "The spirit of the new generation of men is more liberated. They don't have the fear of not being virile. Before this, there were always taboos."<sup>82</sup>

By the 1970s, menswear had significantly broadened from the standard, austere suit and tie combination that had dominated with only minimal variation since the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, a noteworthy aspect of postwar youth cultures of rebellion such as the Beats, rock 'n' roll, and the counterculture was a revolt against the "man in the grey flannel suit"—a revolt against middle-class conformity in a capitalist society that seemed to effeminize men into becoming domesticated husbands and cogs in the corporate machine. As part of their rebellion, these mostly middle-class, white youths took on the trappings of what they mythologized as "hypermasculine" black men and the

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<sup>82</sup> Francesca Stanfill, "YSL Says: 'I go with the times...,'" *Women's Wear Daily*, 24 April 1978.

<sup>83</sup> On the dominance and longevity of the suit in men's fashion see Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); Kaja Silverman, "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse," in *On Fashion*, eds. Shari Benstock and Suzanna Ferriss (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 183-197; and Tim Edwards, *Men in the Mirror: Men's Fashion, Masculinity, and Consumer Society* (London: Cassell, 1997), 18-22.

working-class rebel—or, as in the case of most early rock ‘n’ roll fans, idolized those performers who did so without necessarily breaking the bounds of proper comportment themselves. In large part, this revolt was extremely masculinist, as these youth rebelled against what they constructed as the villainous feminine “other” of mass culture, often through explicit displays of male sexuality and sartorially in the embrace of rebellious symbols such as leather, jeans, and a general casualness that often highlighted a hairy male chest. But such rebellion also held gender bending aspects—such as men in make-up, long hair, and androgynous getups—as part of their search for a more “authentic” and self-aware masculinity that did not merely conform to social expectations.<sup>84</sup>

Significantly, by the end of the 1960s and continuing through the disco era, the sartorial aspect of youthful rebellion had become a common trope in the fashion sense of common mainstream male (and female) consumers. Thomas Frank has described a Peacock Revolution in menswear that built on the rhetoric and discourse of the counterculture, and Anne-Lise François has argued that the exaggeration and ostentation of mainstream 1970s fashion “worked either as a loss of specific political meaning and counterhegemonic force or as a potential gain in common understanding and openness to something previously unacceptable—and often probably as both.” Men and women rebelled against fashion conventions as a means of entering the dominant fold, they stood

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<sup>84</sup> This discussion is indebted to and a necessarily simplified summary of the following: Leerom Medovi, “Mapping the Rebel Image: Postmodernism and the Masculinist Politics of Rock in the U.S.A.,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (Winter 1991-1992): 153-188; Wini Breines, “The Other Fifties: Beats, Bad Girls, and Rock and Roll,” in *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 85-126; Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 55-59; Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. 181-187; and Susan Fast, “Gender and Sexuality in Led Zeppelin: A Woman’s View of Pleasure and Power in Hard Rock,” *American Music* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 245-299. I stop to highlight Susan Fast because while her discussions of Led Zeppelin were helpful in understanding “cock rock” as representations of machismo and male power, the crux of her argument is that women can also identify with this kind of crass, crude, and explicit sexuality.

out to fit in.<sup>85</sup> In 1970s society, which had come to valorize self-actualization and individuality, men were finding such fulfillment through fashions that undermined a long history of inconspicuous menswear.

Yet, much of Western culture had also historically deemed preoccupation with fashion and looks to be feminine, defining menswear in terms of utility rather than ornamentation and seeing overt interest in fashion as counter to and possibly interfering with a man's expected role as serious, focused breadwinner.<sup>86</sup> Such assumed characterizations lingered in the 1970s, as revealed by the qualifications of best-selling author and *Redbook* columnist Judith Viorst: "I feel compelled to say that these men are indisputably heterosexual before I say that they talk about their handsome, custom-made shirts with the monogrammed cuffs . . . or their hammered-silver bracelets, pendants and rings with a savoir and an eye for detail that I once viewed as strictly a female involvement with wearing apparel."<sup>87</sup> Straight men worried that interest in such matters might garner ridicule in the form of accusations of effeminacy or homosexuality. As such, they were compelled to redefine concepts of masculine comportment in order to accommodate this new trend. As one stylist put it, "one thing I'm definite about: When a man worries about seeming homosexual because he's getting his hair done, I say, 'Listen,

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<sup>85</sup> Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), esp. chps. 9 and 10; François, "These Boots Were Made for Walkin': Fashion as 'Compulsive Artifice,'" in *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*, ed. Shelton Waldrep (New York: Routledge, 2000), 155-175, quote from 169.

<sup>86</sup> See Edwards, *Men in the Mirror*, 2-4; Hollander, *Sex and Suits*; Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas*, 179. Also see Silverman, "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse" for discussion of "masculine renunciation" of fashion so as to prevent becoming the object of Mulvey's gaze. Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth, and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001) shows how a playboy ethic of manliness defined through conspicuous consumption grew to new heights in a postwar society that increasingly embraced a consumption ethos, but that such masculinity had to define itself carefully—especially as independent, virile, and distinctly heterosexual—in order to avoid the feminine connotations that surrounded fashion consumerism.

<sup>87</sup> Judith Viorst, "How Men Feel About the Way They Look," *Redbook*, September 1976, 154.

doing *this* is the macho image now.’”<sup>88</sup> That they had to redefine what macho *was* in order to engage in activity previously defined as effeminate, homosexual, and not masculine, suggests that men were deeply concerned with maintaining a connection to the macho ideals of an American past, even if redefined to fit the modern era. For all the talk of “bisexual chic” in the hip circles of the day, much of American society was still on the fence about the androgyny trend.<sup>89</sup> Men wanted access to new fashions and the right to “feminine” vanity, but they did not want those new preoccupations to signal a lack of strength and virility. And yet, resolved an *Esquire* article, “times are changing. People aren’t always sure how to behave. . . . and it’s not surprising that . . . men are permitting themselves to concentrate more on their looks.”<sup>90</sup> New definitions of masculinity developing in an evolving and uncertain gender landscape could accommodate the freedom of men to concentrate on their looks, and ideas of individual identity, expression and openness had affected men’s fashion and style in noticeable ways.

Going to the disco—with its aspects of fantasy and performance—was one way in which men could have the most freedom in their dress, the place where they could be most extravagant, where they acted out the tensions between the new expressiveness of male dressing and lifestyle and the traditional, uptight masculine “uniform.” The time and energy Tony Manero put in as well as the flamboyant outfits he wore became a staple of the advice offered to men looking to get out on the disco dance floor.<sup>91</sup> “The disco is

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<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Patricia O’Brien, “The Dangers of Being Too Good-Looking,” *Esquire*, September 1979, 23.

<sup>89</sup> Moreover, David M. Rorvock, “The Gender Enforcers: Seeing To It That Boys Will Be Boys,” *Rolling Stone*, 9 October 1975, reported on a program designed to “reprogram effeminate boys to better fit into society rather than changing society to accept these boys.”

<sup>90</sup> O’Brien, “Dangers of Being Too Good-Looking,” 22.

<sup>91</sup> According to McGill, *Disco Dressing*, “Although the movie is only a memory and the fashions out of date, John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* portrayed the truth when he took such care in dressing up for getting down on the dance floor” (2).

one place where a man can break the dress mold,” said hair and makeup artist Brian Sherratt and New York City journalist Nalani Leong. Men were working through and expressing new, more open, ideas of masculinity with fashion, and the variety of styles offered in guidebooks is evidence of this tension created by the expanding definition of “masculine.” For example, *Disco Chic* images show men in everything from suits, casual pants, sweaters and other sportswear separates, to an all-in-one disco jumpsuit fashioned to look like a ruffled tuxedo shirt with pants and vest and a “two-piece tunic and pants leather outfit with shoulders and collar defined by trapunto, and stiletto pants tucked into cowboy boots.”<sup>92</sup> The most common advice offered to men dressing for disco remained casual sport separates or a variation of the three-piece suit, perhaps with an army surplus or leather look thrown in for good measure. Guidebooks certainly never went so far as to suggest dresses or skirts as acceptable disco attire for men (though some men did wear these items to certain discos such as Studio 54). Nonetheless, the disco styles of “shining, shimmering shirts . . . pure cotton or pure silk . . . bright colors . . .” were all things that men’s fashion had shied away from in the past.<sup>93</sup>

Men were advised on certain looks but encouraged to be creative, imaginative, and individual in what they chose to wear, making disco dressing a kind of expression that was both liberating and contained within a new, albeit broader, definition of what was masculine. Despite the wide variety of styles men could choose from when going to the discotheque and Yves St. Laurent’s claim that men no longer worried about virility, all these looks remained acceptably masculine because they were incorporated into a

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<sup>92</sup> Sherratt and Leong, *Disco Chic*, 76-85, quote 83. Trapunto stitching defined as “Looking like stacks of circular tubes around the ankles, wrists, neck, and waist, trapunto stitching (made by sewing foam-filled pieces of fabric together at regular intervals)” and “Piping, made by wrapping fabric around cord and sewing the resulting ‘tube’ onto a garment’s surface, seams, or edges” by McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 116.

<sup>93</sup> Morgan, *Disco*, 23.



macho atmosphere that was about competing for attention and attracting women. In the culture of commercialized sex that intensified in the 1970s, men, like women, learned that the achievement of sex appeal through sartorial and other performances was crucial to their self-image and in attracting a possible mate, even if the amount of machoism a man chose to put out there was up to his individual taste.<sup>94</sup> McGill's book on *Disco Dressing* tended to be very clear on this point. Masculinity became a performance put on through clothes that ran the gamut from aggressively macho to sophisticated classics to outrageously androgynous. And, according to McGill, all these looks were about "dressing in the most attractive way" because "if they don't some guy who knows that nightclub women like men with style will get the next dance."<sup>95</sup> The variety of looks McGill presented to his male readers highlighted the ways in which disco was a space where masculinity was contested while being redefined as more open and individually determined.

The most aggressively macho looks McGill suggested were the Basic Look and the Rock 'n' Roll Disco Look, both of which were most overtly about sex appeal. The Rock 'n' Roll disco look, meant for the rapidly growing trend of discos that played danceable rock, incorporated everything from updated mod and "good guy" rock styles to the converse "bad guy" greaser and a cleaned up punk style that was the current New Wave fashion, the most current and popular rock look for the '80s. For both men and women New Wave fashion incorporated at least one of four characteristics—animal print,

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<sup>94</sup> Edwards, *Men in the Mirror* and Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1996) offer compelling discussions of an increasingly prevalent and sexualized masculine fashion industry that offered multiple images of masculinity in the highly consumption oriented culture of 1980s Britain. I have not found an equivalent study for the United States.

<sup>95</sup> McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 3.

synthetic fabric, tight fit, and black—and each of them “add[ed] to the feeling almost all new wave clothes possess[ed], the feeling being a mixture of sex appeal and aggressiveness.”<sup>96</sup> Incorporating pieces like leather jackets, black jeans, and tight T-shirts, each aspect highlighted a man’s sexuality in a different way, and it was “a look that lets men show their muscles and masculinity without looking like they’re trying too hard,” as explained by New Wave designer David Friedlander.<sup>97</sup> With rock’s history of constructing masculinity and male sexuality as tough and aggressive, New Wave fashion in the disco boom was a return to this kind of tough, street smart masculinity and overt sex appeal.<sup>98</sup> The Basic disco look constructed a sexy and macho masculinity with its focus on jeans, which made one stand out in a scene where most people tended to dress up and gave men a masculine image for the changing times because of their tight fit in the front and rear. Writes McGill,

Some sociologists say the way jeans fit a man is an example of ‘shifting erogenous zones.’ Before jeans became big in the fifties, these people say, the way a man impressed a woman was with his money. Now that women are becoming increasingly independent, a man has to prove himself physically, too, and jeans are one way to do it. The image jeans gives a man . . . is a macho image that goes all the way back to the cowboys, and then to the tough greasers of the fifties.<sup>99</sup>

McGill offered men the chance to prove their masculinity using clothes and physical aspects as way to compensate for the changing gender roles of American society in an era shaped by feminism, telling his readers, “the Basic disco look has a very masculine image

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>97</sup> Friedlander quoted in Ibid., 87.

<sup>98</sup> See, for example, Angela McRobbie with Simon Frith, “Rock and Sexuality,” in Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 137-158. I will expand upon this essay, along with other discussions of masculinism in rock, in the next chapter.

<sup>99</sup> McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 9.

if put together right (which I'll show you how to do).”<sup>100</sup> He offered men the option of creating an uncompromisingly masculine image in a time when masculinity was in flux, and he offered to show them how to put it together, underscoring the point that disco culture had become something meant to be taught and learned before jumping in.

The Basic disco look did not need to be quite so “macho,” however, and more conservative disco dress options for men expressed a different kind of masculinity than the overtly sexual macho of jeans. The Prep-Collegiate and Thrift Shop looks offered a masculine style that was more conservative and sophisticated, less overtly sexual. Often described with terms such as “debonair” and “elegant,” the Thrift Shop look toned down the tough and aggressive, overtly sexual masculinity of the Rock ‘n’ Roll and Basic looks, but it was a sophisticated masculinity that still filled the most important role McGill laid out—attracting the opposite sex. The Prep-Collegiate look achieved a similar goal. A look made popular on prep school and Ivy League campuses, it also worked for the disco and constructed an image of masculinity that reeked of money and education (historical markers of manliness), which some women found appealing.<sup>101</sup> It offered men the chance to display a more sophisticated masculinity than the tough, macho image, but one that McGill reassured them would still be attractive to the opposite sex. And men could take on this image even if they were neither rich nor educated; it could be merely a role they played each night at the disco. It offered men less comfortable with macho masculinity a style that remained masculine but was less overtly sexual in its appearance. And it was a unisex look that men were comfortable wearing.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 101.

McGill points out that many men tended to shy away from other unisex or androgynous styles popular among the disco crowd, but in his book, he defined even the most androgynous clothes as masculine. Bodywear was a boom market in women's fashion during the disco years, but McGill remarked that "not many men wear bodywear for disco," possibly because it smacked too much of uniforms for ballet and other kinds of dance (clearly, disco dancing was acceptably masculine, but other forms were still questionable). But to McGill, as long as it was done right—with jeans and a leotard, muscle shirt, or "spandex T-shirt with a deep, wide V-neck."—bodywear could still be incorporated into the macho Basic disco look.<sup>102</sup> The stretchiness of the fabric and its form-fitting quality highlighted muscles, and the deep, wide V-neck on the spandex T-shirt put any man's chest hair on display, each signifying strength and masculinity. The outrageously androgynous and sci-fi inspired Futuristic disco look was also one from which men shied away.<sup>103</sup> Even though men tended not to wear this style at the disco, the fact that he included images of outfits for both men and women suggested that the fantasy aspect of the disco gave men permission to wear this kind of androgynous clothing if they so chose. Most men were not comfortable with this different kind of masculinity, but the disco environment made it acceptable, nonetheless.

### **Feminine *and* Feminist: Disco Fashion for Women**

For women, as with men, the sense of agency concerning the level of overt sexuality portrayed in their disco dressing was especially important considering the changing gender and sexual climate of the time. Variety and self-expression remained paramount, and fashion advice for women at the disco played off the tendencies of the

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<sup>102</sup> McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 22.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

larger fashion industry—individuality being a central one at the time.<sup>104</sup> The industry of disco dressing catered to the larger fashion industry’s emphasis on individuality by promoting looks that captured a variety of female impulses. For example, as they had for men, Sheratt and Leong offered a wide variety of looks for women that ran the gamut from long dresses to short ones, hot pants to trousers, aggressive leather punk looks to a future-wear outfit that looks very similar to the one suggested for the man. One page even shows the same model in two very different outfits—one with leopard print hot pants and a long-sleeve red top, the other with a long-sleeve, satin, flowered blouse over straight leg rose-colored satin pants. The outfits suggest two very different tones, especially in terms of sexuality, both appropriate for the disco.

The link between disco and sexuality, a complicated one in itself, gave the act of dressing for the disco an equally complicated relation to feminism and its conflicted ideas on the new sexual permissiveness of the era. Advice to women about dressing for disco dancing tended to be reactionary (in that it was a reaction to stereotypes of feminism) and in some ways prefeminist (in that many styles involved a resurgence of traditional female stereotypes).<sup>105</sup> Admittedly, certain aspects about the media’s discussions of disco

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<sup>104</sup> See, for example, Mary Daniels, “Who Shapes Fashion Tastes,” *Chicago Tribune*, 31 March 1974 and Francesca Stanfill, “Fashion View: Decoding the Styles of the 70’s,” *New York Times*, 30 December 1979.

<sup>105</sup> Prefeminist is a term Susan Douglas uses to describe the ways in which the beauty campaigns of the 1980s convinced women to indulge an interest in looks by suggesting that control over beauty could be a form of empowerment. In her interpretation, such concerns are prefeminist because they return women to a time when they defined themselves on male approval and felt compelled to reach standards of feminine perfection. She sees such campaigns as seeking to reconcile feminism with prefeminism by turning liberation into an individual endeavor that ultimately “gutted many of the underlying principles of the women’s movement” through its capitulation to capitalism, return to competitive individualism rather than sisterhood, and focus on female bodies for aesthetic rather than health or political reasons. I choose to use the term here because I agree with much of her argument, but I hope to avoid her tendency to explain such concerns as wholly incompatible with liberation and to show instead how feminism and indulgence in beauty and fashion can coexist, if in complex ways, and became a way to redefine feminism to work within an inescapable capitalist consumer culture. See Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), esp. chp. 11.

dressing appealed to prefeminist desires. But in many more ways, sexy or feminine dress in disco was less backlash against feminism than an adaptation of feminist ideas of sexuality and freedom in an attempt to empower individual women as confident and sexual beings. More than anything, curious readers learned through various media that disco dressing for women, like men, was an expression of individuality, offering them a certain freedom of choice in their image-making. For women, disco dressing walked a thin line between individual empowerment and antifeminist objectification. In the process, disco fashion both contributed to and was shaped by the evolution and redefinition of feminism in the late 1970s and beyond.

Feminism and its attempt to redefine the sexual revolution recognized women as sexual beings, entitled to sexual pleasure on equal terms with men, but how women chose to express their newly legitimated sexuality was a controversial issue, especially by the end of the 1970s. Radical feminists opened their public campaign for liberation by protesting the 1968 Miss America Pageant for its glorification of women as objects judged on their beauty rather than their abilities, their bodies exploited in a way that had done damage to many a woman's self-image as society compelled her to compete with other women for the male attention said to define her self-worth. By 1968, youthful rebellion and counterculture had moved even mainstream female fashion a long way from the intricate bras, girdles, and crinolines of the 1950s and early 1960s to more casual and skin bearing fashions like the mini skirt.<sup>106</sup> But many feminists still argued that impossible beauty standards as a measure of female social value stood as representative

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<sup>106</sup> For more on female fashion and beauty standards in the 1950s see Breines, *Young, White and Miserable*. For a study of body shaping garments for women more generally, see Wendy Burns-Ardolino, *Jiggle: (Re)Shaping American Women* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007). Burns-Ardolino interprets the mini skirt as a "fashion articulation of the feminist movement" (16), but I argue the mini skirt was more a reflection of sexual revolution—the kind of sexual revolution that many feminists would eventually reject.

of male privilege and female oppression. In response, radical feminists planned to (but never actually did) burn bras at their Miss America protest as one symbol of female oppression, and while they talked of women getting to know their bodies for health reasons, many feminists covered their shapes in more masculine-tailored clothing, rejecting feminine standards in an attempt to demand respect as human beings rather than belittled objects meant to sell consumer goods and please male sexual fantasies.

Yet, feminists' relation to femininity, consumerism, and sexual objectification was complicated, contradictory, and ultimately personal. As fashions in the mid- and late-1970s, thanks in part to the influence of disco, moved in the direction of form-fitted, skin-bearing, sexy cuts often paired with high heels, many feminists denounced the trend as backlash, condemning the return to feminine and sexy fashions as a threat to their cause.<sup>107</sup> But such rhetoric had the potential to, and often succeeded in, alienating would-be or current feminists who actively enjoyed displaying their femininity and sexuality through clothing. "At a time when feminists were still being ridiculed as rejects from the marriage market, or lesbians, I wore eye makeup and miniskirts, even hot pants," remembered Anselma Dell'Olio, an Italian immigrant to New York City in 1966 and active feminist nearly on arrival. "What made me a useful movement spokesperson to the country at large made me anathema to many radical women," she continued, explaining that "some feminists would dismiss me and women who looked and dressed

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<sup>107</sup>See, for example, Judith Thurman, "How to Get Dressed and Still Be Yourself," *Ms.*, April 1979; Karen Durbin, "Notes on Vamp," *Ms.*, April 1979; and Sheryl Olsen, Letters, *Ms.*, August 1979. Judy Klemesrud, "The Year of the Lusty Woman," *Esquire*, 19 December 1978, explores the year's fashions as a return to women as sex objects and explains the trend in terms of both backlash and increased female confidence and agency.

like me with the epithet ‘beauty queen.’”<sup>108</sup> To have helped women discover sexual pleasure and the legitimate right to sexual subjecthood and then to suggest that those women who chose to express their sexuality publicly demeaned themselves by doing so was a contradiction in terms that made many feminists and feminist-sympathizers uncomfortable. Moreover, the notion of being sexually objectified was a not a universal concern for all women, whereas the serious consideration and respect of both women’s ideas and female sexual subjectivity was.<sup>109</sup> Finding a balance between these concerns proved difficult in the attempt at creating a unified feminist movement, and individual and personal variations on the themes of sexual power and sexual expression prevailed, contributing to fissures, splits, and fragmentation.

By the end of the 1970s, as the women’s movement splintered and seeped into the mainstream, a woman’s relation to her sexuality and the consumer market that commercialized it had become an individual decision, appropriated and adapted by women in an atmosphere that praised individuality, becoming a unique blend of various strands of the women’s movement. At the same time that cultural feminists were valorizing female difference, many women in mainstream society were also ready to (re)discover their feminine natures, believing, “in so far as it is aligned with social conditioning, femininity can have a negative, stunting influence. But when women make free choices as to where and how and when they want to be and feel most feminine, their life options are opened up rather than limited.”<sup>110</sup> This rediscovery of the feminine

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<sup>108</sup> Anselma Dell’Olio, “Home before Sundown,” in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women’s Liberation*, eds. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 166, 169.

<sup>109</sup> See, for example, Barbara Epstein, “Ambivalence about Feminism,” in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women’s Liberation*, eds. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 124.

<sup>110</sup> Bette-Jane Raphael, “Feeling Female: What Turns It On In You?” *Redbook*, September 1976, 74.



incorporated radical feminist ideas of sexual pleasure and agency in ways that made a woman's sexuality empowering without being demeaning. And many non-movement women defended their decisions to wear feminine, flirty, sexy clothing by redefining their understandings of feminism to accommodate a sense of sexy self-determination.<sup>111</sup> For example, writer Tricia Kushner who decided to start wearing skirts again after several years in her feminist garb of jeans and pants said, "I used to be afraid that if I looked pretty men would approach me on a purely sexual level. But I now realize that I can look good and not allow that; it's controlled by the way you act."<sup>112</sup> On the one hand, these women were redefining feminism in ways that rejected the cultural feminist notion that sexual expression for women in a patriarchal society was always threatening. On the other hand, they were taking pleasure in cultural feminism's valorization of difference and embrace of individual action. Most importantly, they were creating a feminism that worked within, rather than against, the commodity driven culture of commercialized sexual freedom that had developed over the 1960s and '70s, a characteristic that would become central to feminism as it evolved and then reflourished over the next decades.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> See, especially, Claudia Edelman, "What Turns a Woman On?" *Redbook*, March 1978.

<sup>112</sup> Kushner quoted in Thurman, "How to Get Dressed," 51. Karen J. Mecartney echoed the sentiment, writing in to *Ms.*, "Today's fashions allow a woman to be herself: to wear desert boots, high heels, or anything in between; to wear comfortable clothing, or constricting clothing, or a combination of both. Fashion today celebrates being a woman and being one's self. Only when misunderstood does it put women in uniform." Mecartney, Letters, *Ms.*, August 1979, 6. Also see Kris Gronquist, Letters, *Ms.*, August 1979, 8. Even more radical, outspoken feminist Vicki McCarty defended posing in *Playboy* arguing, "the tendency to suppress a woman's sexuality in order to try to fit into worlds that were previously inhabited only by men has contributed to the stereotype of feminists as man-haters. And yet there is no reason why the women's movement should not be strong enough to allow whole and complete women to redefine those worlds." McCarty quoted in Shearlean Duke, "Now Works for Playboy," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 December 1980. Betty Friedan also felt women had come into their own as confident women who could choose how to express themselves as sexual agents and individuals: "As Betty Friedan sees it, there has *never* been anything wrong with being a sex object, 'if you can be a sex subject as well, and that's not all you are.' A sex subject, she explained, is a person who can choose as well as be chosen." See Klemesrud, "Year of the Lusty Woman," 34.

<sup>113</sup> Anna Gough-Yates makes a similar argument as part of her explication of how *Charlie's Angels* should be taken seriously as representative of significant cultural developments of the era, namely the emergence

These changes represented a reactionary trend against the feminist movement and direct response to the negative stereotypes of “mannish” feminists, but the focus on individual expression in the larger fashion industry convinced women that their style choices had little to do with their level of liberation. As *Chicago Tribune* staff writer Mary Daniels explained, “women’s lib made women feel bad about spending money on and enjoying feminine clothes. (Whoever said you have to look like Lon Chaney to prove you are a liberated woman?) Women can now wear frilly, ultraromantic dresses and becoming makeup and not be considered traitors to their sex.”<sup>114</sup> Daniels exaggerated the media-inspired notion that feminist women were not fashionable or feminine women (merely women trying to redefine what feminine meant), but the female readers in Chicago who remained otherwise ambivalent to the movement would have welcomed her confirmation that liberation and feminism did not necessitate the abandonment of femininity and fashion. More than a “resurgence of traditional stereotypes” or evidence of the “invisibility of feminist achievement,” as Peter Carroll contends in his history of the 1970s, the return to feminine dressing in the disco arena and elsewhere was a result of the acceptance by society that feminist did not necessarily equal “butch” or manly.<sup>115</sup> It also reflected the emerging dominance of liberal feminism over

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of “the single girl.” She best explicates the ideas in her discussion of Gloria Steinem and *Cosmopolitan* as feminisms “comfortable with consumerism.” See Gough-Yates, “Angels in Chains? Feminism, Femininity and Consumer Culture in *Charlie’s Angels*” in *Action TV: Tough-Guys, Smooth Operators and Foxy Chicks*, ed. Bill Osgerby and Anna Gough-Yates (London: Routledge, 2001), 86-88.

<sup>114</sup> Daniels, “Who Shapes Fashion Tastes.”

<sup>115</sup> Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982), 273. Amber Vogel shows how the editor of *Vogue* in the 1970s had a similar agenda in creating feminine women as agents rather than objects in couture fashion. See Amber Vogel, “State of Grace: American *Vogue* in the Seventies,” in *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*, ed. Shelton Waldrep (New York: Routledge, 2000), 178-192.

the rapidly disintegrating radical feminism—the reemergence of “respectability” and working within the system as the face of the larger movement.<sup>116</sup>

Correlating with this trend in general 1970s fashion, reading about disco taught women that being feminine in their dress was desirable but neither required nor necessarily in conflict with their life views outside of fashion and the disco—that disco acted as a space where a certain theatricality and performativity dictated dressing in relation to gender.<sup>117</sup> Disco guidebooks like McGill’s emphasized how “with disco, girls suddenly discovered there were such things as pretty high-heeled shoes and things that sparkle,” but women talked about how they made an active choice to wear feminine items out to the disco. As Jan Sweda, at the Chicago disco *Sassafras* explained, “I dress purely for dancing . . . I love to wear soft, pretty dresses. They’re more feminine than pants, and they give a great, airy feeling that’s almost elegant.” Yet, pants were always an option, as Elise Travis, patron of *Zorine’s*, commented, “When I go out . . . I try to wear something striking. It depends on my mood if I wear pants or a skirt.”<sup>118</sup> In many ways, choosing a disco outfit that accentuated one’s femininity was as much about being comfortable on the dance floor as it was about returning to prefeminist stereotypes. In the world of nighttime fashion, however, reactions to the stereotypes of no-frills

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<sup>116</sup> Also, the refusal to accept “butch” identities as acceptably feminine. Femininity and androgyny could coexist, but “butch” remained too radical for mainstream America to respect.

<sup>117</sup> Many scholars have discussed the theatrical and performative aspect of social categories such as gender. See, for example, Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990, repr. New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>118</sup> McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 5; Jan Sweda, and Elise Travis quoted in Marilyn Stitz, “An eye on you, ‘Dressed Up,’” *Chicago Tribune*, 20 February 1978. Various media outlets encouraged women to wear pants or man-tailored fashions, as evidenced by the following: “‘Disco Fever’ Clothes at JCPenney,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 October 1978; “Nightlife is Ultra,” *Essence*, December 1978; Judi McMahon, *A Guide to Disco Dancing*, (New York: Dell, 1979), 52; and Morgan, *Disco*, 23. Bekka Rasul, “‘Boogie Down’ Disco Fashions,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 October 1978, was an anomaly, claiming at this same time, “The new ‘so-called’ men’s wear is out for women going to a disco. Most adult establishments prefer women to look ‘dressed up’ in soft, feminine and sexy looking clothing.”

feminism most often meant a focus on the sexiness of female fashion, not just its femininity. In many cases, feminine and sexy (revealing, sensuous, etc.) became interchangeable as descriptors of female disco wear, and this focus on sexy female fashion was both a reaction to stereotypes of the feminist movement's (nontraditional) fashion sense and an appropriation of the results feminism and sexual liberation had had in terms of lessening fashion's constrictions of the female body.<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, disco fashion, often described as "body-conscious," allowed women to express a kind of overt sexuality without having to resign themselves to the role of sex object.

One of the most popular of these looks was referred to as bodywear—from leotard and wrap skirt to full-on bodysuit—and the women (they *were* mostly women) who designed these fashions made reference to the various influences of feminism on their design sensibility even as they recognized its upfront sexuality and attention-demanding qualities. "You know why bodywear is looked on in a sexy way? Because it came out as we were coming off a very unsexy period," explained Betsey Johnson, the New York designer many credit as the master of spandex clothing.<sup>120</sup> For Betsey Johnson, bodywear was a reactionary design trend. She felt "the baggy, blazer, retro, Annie Hall, status label, investment clothing, unsexy, unbody, and uncolorful clothing many women wear" held these women back from fully embracing their sexuality, and designed bodywear that would allow women to become "very aware of [their] body" and of people looking at them and "to feel good about it."<sup>121</sup> Bonnie August, designer of Bodywear for Danskin, talked about how "Bodywear is right for women today because

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<sup>119</sup> "The sexy wrap-top is cool, revealing, and ultrafeminine," from Sheratt and Leong, *Disco Chic*, 31, is just one example of this interchangeability.

<sup>120</sup> McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 20.

<sup>121</sup> Johnson quoted in *Ibid.*, 22.

women have developed a whole new attitude about themselves over the last ten years.” She continued, “Fifteen years ago women were afraid to show their bodies as they really were. They wore all kinds of construction, especially around their bust lines. But the Danskin leotard shows the body as it is. I mean, it even shows the nipples because most women don’t wear them with bras.”<sup>122</sup> These designers felt they could exploit through clothing the changes in female consciousness about their bodies wrought by the feminism and sexual liberation. The feminist idea that women should be comfortable with their bodies meant, to bodywear designers, that women should also be comfortable showing off their bodies—rather than covering them as some feminists had done—and gaining a sense of empowerment and freedom through the display of their “natural” shape.

Freedom and empowerment through bodywear was often not actually about complete freedom of the body, but the designers’ defense of it in feminist terms made it about more than women as sexual objects. Feminism expressed through disco bodywear seemed to be an exclusive form of liberation, open only to a certain segment of acceptable body types or women who had the time and money to participate in the fitness craze that engulfed American culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>123</sup> As McGill put it, “It goes without saying, of course, that if you are truly overweight it’s better to exercise off your extra pounds in bodywear than to wear it to a disco.”<sup>124</sup> Offering advice on how to wear bodywear designs to create the illusion of a better body also undermined the idea that women should be comfortable with their unique body type and

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<sup>122</sup> August Quoted in McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 22. August expressed a similar sentiment more than two decades later saying, “In those times I used to say that women are feeling better about their bodies. They feel good about their bodies and they want to show their bodies off, and so I designed the clothing that allows [sic] them to do that.” See Bonnie August, interview by Jasen Emmons, transcription, Experience Music Project, 11 September 2002.

<sup>123</sup> Akin to what Susan Douglas describes in *Where the Girls Are*.

<sup>124</sup> McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 23-24.

circumscribed the supposed freedom that women could wear whatever they wanted however they chose. Yet, at the same time, the attempt by designers to focus on a woman's attitude rather than her body type in choosing this clothing indicates an absorption of feminist ideas. According to the designers, bodywear was meant for and worn by confident and self-assured women:

“What happened to women when bras were discarded is now happening with bodywear – it's the same revolution,” said [Norma] Kamali. She stressed the woman wearing bodywear is confident. “She's gotten it together inside and now is bringing the inside outside. It's all part of our working through a lot of things (raised by feminism). We're now in a postliberation period and are confident enough to be both feminine and aggressive.”<sup>125</sup>

Certainly, wearing bodywear and the feminist discarding of bras were not the same thing, as Kamali espoused. They did, however, come from related veins of the same movement, as Kamali recognized—bodywear was one option helping American women work through the various issues feminism raised concerning the body and sexuality. And as far as designers like Kamali were concerned, Bodywear became a symbol of a woman who, with the help of feminism, had gained a sense of confidence in who she was and because of that sense of self-assurance was comfortable wearing body-conscious clothing.

Disco guidebooks often described this confidence as a sexual confidence. Take Sheratt and Leong's discussion of Betsey Johnson's looks for disco, in which they explain that Johnson described “the people who step out in her fashions [as] strong ladies,

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<sup>125</sup> Mary Reinholz, “Bodywear: Shape of Things to Come,” *Women's Wear Daily*, 27 October 1978, 30. Bill Kaiserman who designed “sensual and revealing,” feminine evening and disco clothes for Rafael specified the ideal woman for his clothes to be “about 5 feet 8 inches tall, rather lean and not overly busty.” But the authors of *Disco Chic* explain that he went on to say that while that is the ideal, “He feels . . . that any woman, regardless of age or size (within reason, of course), would look her most feminine in his evening clothes.” They continued, “Emotionally, he thinks, women who buy his designs are positively strong women. Because his clothes are not meant to stand out, but rather to enhance the personality and character, he feels his clothes are better carried by a self-assured woman.” See Sheratt and Leong, *Disco Chic*, 25.

‘wanting and willing to be looked at, strong about their sexuality, and able to handle wearing my clothes.’”<sup>126</sup> One of Johnson’s signature pieces was “the striped bodysuit with gloves,” which, according to *Disco Chic*, had been “popping up at discos all over town.” An undeniably sexy ensemble that left little to the imagination, it took a confident and self-assured woman to put her body on display in only a bodysuit. But the guidebook also makes clear that the sexiness of the piece did not necessarily come from the bodysuit itself, but from the woman wearing it: “The growling female sexuality comes from the wearer, who Betsey says, ‘Is not afraid of anything.’”<sup>127</sup> In the disco era, feeding off previous eras of feminism and sexual revolution, a woman in a spandex bodysuit was not merely a sex object meant for men to ogle; she was simultaneously, and most significantly, a sexual subject. The modern woman who had gained confidence in and control of her own sexuality gave bodywear its sexiness.

The comments above suggests that, at least for these designers, being sexy and being feminist were not mutually exclusive and that the idea of self-assured women was central to their concept of feminism. The female liberation represented in bodywear focused on individual presentation rather than the communal actions of sisterhood and fit into the new focus on individual consumption in American society that came to shape the later years of the feminist movement, as described by Ruth Rosen.<sup>128</sup> The idea of individualism and self-assurance as especially important for women was not lost on designers of body wear as Maya, a young designer from India expressed in *Women’s Wear Daily*: “to me, the new bold individuals are women. When women put on

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<sup>126</sup> Sheratt and Leong, *Disco Chic*, 26.

<sup>127</sup> Sheratt and Leong, *Disco Chic*, 41.

<sup>128</sup> Rosen, *World Split Open*, 308-314.

bodywear, the feeling of the fabric triggers a sense of self-affirmation in their minds. They are defining themselves instead of being defined by others.”<sup>129</sup> This emphasis on individuality contributed to the breakdown of sisterhood within the feminist movement, encouraging women to find empowerment through self-identity. In doing so, however, it was not simply a backlash against the feminist movement but an attempt to appeal to an ever-larger majority of women, and an inherent result of the dilemma of attempting to band together as a gender while simultaneously trying to break down gender construction.<sup>130</sup> In disco, an emphasis on individual expression through fashion meant that any woman could dress in the popular sexy fashions while remaining confident and in control of her own sexuality. Be it a distortion of original feminist ideals or merely a re-definition and adaptation of them that suited a mainstream sensibility, the fashion industry’s appropriation of both individualism and feminism to create sexy disco clothing recognized the changes women had experienced and wished to capitalize on them to offer women a chance to express their sexuality in a confident manner. Dressing in body-conscious clothing that indisputably drew attention to the sexiest aspects of a woman’s figure made the disco—which highlighted glamour and sex and put aside work and reality—a place where women could make sexual liberation central and engage the empowerment of choice through their clothes as well as their dancing.

Individual choice and expression was so essential to how disco culture incorporated feminism that McGill offered the idea that women could wear bodywear on any level of the sexiness scale. McGill advised that only a confident woman who was

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<sup>129</sup> Quoted in Reinholz, “Bodywear: Shape of Things to Come.”

<sup>130</sup> A similar dilemma stifled the first wave of feminism in the early twentieth century. See Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).



conscious that she was being looked at and confident in that role should wear extreme bodywear (like a bodysuit) to a disco, but he also made sure to teach women that they could find bodywear to fit whatever their comfort level of sexual expression: “the Bodywear disco look is easily worn without being overly inflammatory . . . . The truth is, spandex stretch clothing can be worn as sexy or subtle as you like, and I’m going to show you how.”<sup>131</sup> It was important, in this age of gender change and growing individualism, to offer women a choice in terms of how they wanted to express their sexuality, and bodywear acted as one disco look that offered women that choice, even if they had to be taught how to properly put together the various looks.

Beyond bodywear, McGill and other disco guide authors gave women a variety of looks to choose from in terms of their sexual forwardness and expression. The Rock ‘n’ Roll disco look for women, as with men, was the most aggressively and overtly sexual. Women who read McGill’s book learned that wearing this look to a disco was a way for them to express their sexuality in public, without necessarily getting a negative “bad girl” reputation or passively assuming the role of sex object that were associated with such display prior to the sexual revolution and women’s liberation.<sup>132</sup> Ina Bernstein, owner of a New Wave boutique located in New York’s SoHo section, explained it well: “It’s not trappy, just strong. When women wear tiger prints, it’s not because they’re passive kittens, it’s because they’re tigers. And discos are perfect places for women to flaunt their sexiness. . . . because discos give you permission to really let go.”<sup>133</sup> Disco provided a space where women could work through the issues sexual revolution and

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<sup>131</sup> McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 24-25.

<sup>132</sup> McGill, *Disco Dressing* points out, “The look works best at rock discos, but women can wear it anywhere there’s music” (87).

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 85.

feminism had precipitated. Because of its fantastical character, disco provided a space where women could embrace their sexual nature in ways that remained much more muddled in their lived reality.

McGill recognized, however, that even in discos, patrons would not universally celebrate this overt sexual expression on the part of women: “If you decide to show the ‘bad girl’ in you, you should know it inspires an intimidated, ‘What would I do with *that?*’ response in a lot of men. Of course, when you’re dressed in a Rock ‘n’ Roll disco look, you don’t care what men think, right?”<sup>134</sup> Indeed, a woman who took on this look was confident enough in her sexuality that it did not matter that many men were still not comfortable with such expression, nor did she need concern herself with the fact that her revealing clothes might make her a sex object in the eyes of men. She was creating an image of sexual subject in control of her own sexuality and eager to show it off. Descriptions like McGill’s presented disco as a sexually empowering place for women, and the fact that the bobby-soxer “good girl” look had almost completely disappeared from the rock ‘n’ roll scene, taken over by the “bad girl” look, suggests that many women of the 1970s had become more comfortable with their sexuality and expressing it, even if men had not.

Yet, not all women were comfortable expressing their sexuality in the form of “bad girl,” aggressively sexual Rock ‘n’ Roll looks, which is why McGill described looks like Bodywear as versatile and suggested other looks entirely. The disco industry, embracing American society’s growing individualism and the direction in which feminist ideas were evolving, taught women that they could also enjoy disco in conservatively

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 86.

sexy looks. The Thrift Shop disco look, for example, was about “making a woman look sensual in a sophisticated way” while simultaneously presenting a “close-to-wanton” bedroom look when investing in items like slips from the 1950s as dresses.<sup>135</sup> Women who were not interested in provocative and sexy looks or those who wanted to try on a different image for a night, learned that with the Prep-Collegiate look, “what you want to achieve is a look that is pretty, not vampy,” clearly distinguishing it from the more outwardly sexual tone of other disco looks.<sup>136</sup> Such variety provided a way for women to exercise individual choice in their own sexual expression because women could still garner the individual attention that defined the disco experience without having to embrace the overt and aggressive sexuality that also made up disco culture.

Nonetheless, even the most conservative disco looks threatened to deflate feminist ideas when authors made approval by men the ultimate goal. Despite the fact that the Prep-Collegiate disco look avoided the overtly sexual and revealing clothing of other looks, McGill still advised women to approach this conservative look as one in which appearing sexy and appealing to men was important. Unlike the Rock ‘n’ Roll disco look, described as so aggressively sexy it intimidated many men and thus put women firmly in the subject position (dressing for themselves rather than for men), the Prep look threatened to take away women’s autonomy as discerning subject rather than mere object of affection because of how McGill defended it by reminding women that many men would approve—that pretty could still be sexy as far as men were concerned.<sup>137</sup> Men may not have viewed women who dressed in Prep as just a sexy body, but McGill taught

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<sup>135</sup> McGill, *Disco Dressing*, 55, 67, 68.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

women who chose this look that they still had to concern themselves with what men would think of them, thus catering to the desires of men rather than their own desires exclusively. Bodywear and other disco looks negotiated the same problem, encouraging confidence and self-assurance in women while often making that confidence contingent on the knowledge that men would admire a woman's curves in such an outfit—something of a feminist quandary. And even though women new to the disco world learned from McGill that they were free to put comfort over sex appeal, they also learned that “the *right*—meaning sexy—fit in your jeans will ensure that half of your Basic disco look is just right when it comes to dressing in the right way for the social nature of discos [emphasis added].”<sup>138</sup> If being sexy was right, then being merely comfortable must have seemed somehow wrong, and if a woman was being sexy in preparation for the social nature of disco, it was most likely in an attempt to be social with the opposite sex, thus appealing to the desires of men, not for her own confidence or self-affirmation. Indeed, many photos and statements in disco guidebooks or media articles suggested that if women followed their instructions on how to dress for the disco they would get the man, even if they chose not to give in to his affection.<sup>139</sup> Female disco novices often could not escape the suggestion or blatant advice that they should put together their disco looks with the goal of catching a man through female sex appeal. Yet, however focused on sex appeal and male approval disco fashion advice for women may have been, women claimed to have control over their fashion choices, especially in terms of sexual

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>139</sup> For such images that are especially compelling see Deats, *Dancing Disco*. Also see “Disco Fashions Hitting Scene,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 21 September 1978, which also appeared in *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 21 September 1978; and *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 October 1978.

expression, or at least the fashion industry—via disco guidebooks, magazines, and newspapers—tried to convince them they did.

Disco culture mixed femininity, consumption, and newfound acceptance of the body to talk about a rediscovery of the female body supposedly wrought by the feminist movement and appropriated by the fashion and disco industries to sell clothes. In disco dressing, women could indulge their prefeminist femininity by wearing swirly skirts and form-fitting tops without being antifeminist or embracing backlash. It was when “feminine” or “body-conscious” fashion became equated with “sexy” fashion that this tendency became much more complicated—walking the line between empowering and dangerously antifeminist. Nonetheless, the idea that both male and female designers and authors encouraged women to embrace their sexuality in their disco attire—to publicly express their chosen level of sexuality—was new, significant, and one way the tensions of a changing gender landscape were played out through disco culture.

## **Conclusion**

As much as the commercialization of mainstream disco seemed to set up a kind of model for potential dancers to follow, the ways in which that model was defined by and capitalized on its unique historical context meant that disco provided an environment accepting of a wide variety of lifestyles and personal sentiments, even as there were attempts to rein in the most outrageous of those possibilities through the mainstreaming process. There were steps to learn and guidelines to follow, but disco manuals and instructional guides also reminded people that disco dancing was a “natural” activity with a focus on creativity and self-expression, which meant that everyone could participate and define their own level of sexuality—sexually adventurous, romantic, or just plain

fun. The choices that women made in dressing for the discotheque paralleled tensions within larger society as women negotiated the influence of feminism and its growing backlash in their expressive lives. Disco fashions helped teach women how to navigate between the sexual subjectivity and agency feminism had tried to offer them and the sexual objectification that came from dressing in ways that made them attractive to men. For men, learning new dance steps and personal expression in fashion created new measures of masculinity and a masculine sexuality that could be traditionally aggressive and macho or more subdued, open and expressive. Disco created for men, as it had for women, a gender definition created through personal confidence and style but which seemed to depend on the opposite sex for approval. In spite of its commercialization, disco's development within the 1970s ethos of liberation and individuality meant that certain choices reified traditional gender definitions while others simultaneously challenged and redefined those markers.

Black men were especially concerned over these developments. As straight white men learned to liberate themselves by redefining masculinity through a synthesis of soft and macho, most black men were concerned with garnering recognition as "real men" by adopting markers of masculinity traditionally used to define white manhood. Increasing numbers of black men were wearing jewelry in the 1970s, defining the practice as expressions of individuality, financial success, and pride in the African past. But this adornment of the male body had not lost its feminine stigma within the black population. Not only does the title of an *Ebony* article on the subject, "Should Men Wear Jewelry?" suggest ambiguity, some readers were vocal about their dislike of the trend. "Suffice it to say that black men need the baubles and bangles of contemporary life like we need an

infusion of swine flu,” wrote in Robert T. Bowen of Los Angeles who claimed support of jewelry for men was supporting the feminization of black men and jeopardizing the future of the black population.<sup>140</sup> Moreover, an article on “The Pleasures and Problems of the ‘Pretty’ Black Man” garnered responses that severely denounced the topic as undermining black masculinity.<sup>141</sup> The black community shared with the white community questions of masculine definition and its relation to appearance, and questioned the growing acceptance of masculine vanity as one of many challenges posed to understandings of race and gender in the post-Black Power era. Similar challenges occurred in the arena of music, as white and black men negotiated what it meant to be masculine in a music that attempted to breakdown boundaries of both race and gender.

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<sup>140</sup> Robert T. Bowen, letters to the editor, “Should Men Wear Jewelry?” *Ebony*, December 1976, 19-20.

<sup>141</sup> letters to the editor, “The ‘Pretty’ Black Man,” *Ebony*, November 1974. In response to “The Pleasures and Problems of the ‘Pretty’ Black Man,” *Ebony*, September 1974.

## Chapter 4

### **“Effective Mixes of the Tender and the Tough”: Male Disco Icons and the Expansion of Masculine Ideals**

Barry White was a soul icon and disco pioneer who worked as a composer, producer, arranger, and singer. He was involved in the release of ten gold and platinum albums in the 1970s, most with a strongly orchestral soul sound. In June 1975, *Sepia* magazine included the following quote from the star: “There were people around the world who wouldn’t believe that the man who wrote ‘Love’s Theme’ was black. They didn’t believe that a black man could feel that way.”<sup>1</sup> A year later, the magazine described a similar but opposite confusion with Harry Wayne Casey, the white leader of the mixed-race group KC and the Sunshine Band, who also played multiple roles in the music industry and had numerous disco and R&B hits in the 1970s, his with a funky base: “Their music was to the ears of the public 100 per cent black until finally the group emerged from the studios where they were making all their soul sounds and the truth was out as they took the spotlight on the performing stage.”<sup>2</sup> More than illustrating how two acts could become equally strong disco talents with very different musical sounds, these complementary statements show how disco upset dominant understandings of music, race, and gender in the 1970s. For people to believe that “Love’s Theme”—one of the most recognizable disco anthems of all time—could not have been written by a black

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<sup>1</sup> White quoted in Bob Lucas, “How Barry White Got Rich on Love,” *Sepia*, June 1975, 65.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Salvo, “Black Funk with a White Twist,” *Sepia*, June 1976, 73.



man, while registering shock that Casey of the Sunshine Band was white, shows just how divergent black and white musical categories were in the early 1970s. Moreover, that “Love’s Theme” was such a surprise for people’s perception of what a black *man* could feel indicates that race and masculinity in the 1970s had a connection in the imagination of many that was disturbed by White’s deviation. Disco and the DJs who spun it, by showing little concern for the race or gender of an artist as long as the song had a danceable beat, became a cultural expression of the confusion of categories permeating American society in the 1970s. In this chapter, I will look at how the mixing and blending that defined disco reflected the breakdown of previously dominant racial and gender understandings within the context of men’s response to feminism and a crumbling Black Power movement.

As we saw in previous chapters, a spectrum of masculine options presented themselves in the disco scene where men confronted and learned to navigate a redefined gender order in which movements like women’s liberation and sexual revolution had challenged their traditional understandings of manhood and masculine sexuality. All totaled, disco divas far outnumbered their male counterparts, but it is necessary to analyze those men who made it big as icons of the disco craze in order to fully understand how their representations of masculinity fit into social and cultural trends of the 1970s. While most scholars agree that disco was a comfortable space for androgyny and generally held a kind of “masculinity deficit,” most often using this designation as part of their explanation for the backlash against disco, they generally fail to thoroughly examine how the figures who embodied disco represented this new kind of “soft”

masculinity.<sup>3</sup> Peter Shapiro, for example, refers to disco's "problematic relationship with masculinity" as he prepares to explain the disco backlash, but he fails to elaborate adequately on that relationship elsewhere in the text.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a close examination of disco's most popular male icons shows that the masculinity they represented was not always a weak, deficient variety. Disco masculinity tended to blend various traits traditionally understood as masculine or feminine, but the masculinity of disco's biggest male stars was not so much about androgyny as it was about men reinterpreting feminist ideas for themselves. In doing so, they redefined masculinity in ways that capitulated to the demands of feminism while still holding on to some of "traditional" masculinity's most macho ideas. In order to understand why disco became such a widespread phenomenon we have to explore further what kind of appeal it held for straight men, even if they were not its biggest audience and were often its most vocal detractors.

Blacks—especially the male-dominated black music industry and press—made up some of the ranks of these detractors. For many black participants and industry personnel, their paradoxical relationship with disco as a mainstream entertainment form constituted a familiar debate over racial assimilation and white exploitation of black cultural forms. However, considered within its historical context of social movements and gender confusion, this paradoxical relationship was as much about conceptions and redefinitions of masculinity as it was about race and cultural appropriation. If we

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<sup>3</sup> "Masculinity deficit" is a phrase used by Alice Echols, "'Shaky Ground'" Popular Music in the Disco Years," in "'Shaky Ground': Popular Music in the Disco Years," in *Shaky Ground: The '60s and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 187. Also see Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005); Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2001) and Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 231.

understand the history of black music and its intersections with the black freedom struggle—Black Power, in particular—we can better understand how this problem was one of gender and sexual conflict within the community as much as it was a problem of cultural appropriation. The supposed colorblindness of the genre presented the biggest concerns—concerns of gender and sexual definition as much as musical definition and industry. The mixing and blending and crossover of disco that made musical distinctions by race harder to define also meant that the gender and sexual definitions of Black Power, as represented in the soul music of the previous era, also became blurred.<sup>5</sup> Unlike rock, the dominance of which its supporters believed to be threatened by disco but generally incompatible with it and on the opposing end of the musical spectrum (even though the genres often overlapped), disco’s nod to colorblindness and gender and sexual inclusivity threatened black musical expression more profoundly because it threatened to redefine all black music as disco, which many understood as going against the patriarchal definition of Black Power masculinity. Moreover, after years of defining white masculinity as weak in comparison to their own newfound devotion to patriarchy and warrior masculinity, defenders of “authentic” black music saw in disco a genre that opened itself to black and white representations of masculinity that were essentially the same.

And while new forms of masculinity concerned those in the black community who clung to a more singular understanding of black patriarchy, I want to show that

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<sup>5</sup> In making this claim, I draw on scholars such as Phillip Brian Harper, who, in critiquing concepts of black masculinism and “authenticity,” argues that “all debates over and claims to ‘authentic’ African-American identity are largely animated by a profound anxiety about the status specifically of African-American masculinity” and Waldo E. Martin Jr. who critiques the essentializing tendencies of black cultural politics and music in the Black Power era, even as such music positively promoted self-love in the African-American community. See Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), ix, and Martin, “‘Be Real Black for Me’: Representation, Authenticity, and the Cultural Politics of Black Power,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present and Future*, ed. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O’Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 243-266.

disco's representations of masculinity as a colorblind blend of masculine and feminine is what helped secure its popularity as a new definition of masculinity came to dominate in the latter half of the 1970s. Just as white men had made adjustments to the demands of feminists and continued to work through these changes, black feminism gained significant ground by the second half of the 1970s, contributing to the fall of Black Power and the sense of a new black masculine ideal that found a cultural representation in disco. Psychologist and author Muriel Dimen once explicated what many radical feminists called for when it came to sexual liberation: "female sexual turf and male emotional range need expansion."<sup>6</sup> While many feminists insisted that society never achieved these goals, especially the latter, to any significant degree, male disco performers attempted to accommodate such ideas. Each artist's desire to maintain some form of masculine identity limited these attempted accommodations—few were as adamant about breaking down gender norms as radical feminism dictated. Nonetheless, they presented men with a new range of options when it came to relations with the opposite sex and expressions of masculine sexuality. In the way they made music and constructed their media image, male disco stars made concessions to feminism, or were influenced by various concepts of liberation—some subtle, some blatant, all complex and multivalent.

### **John Travolta and the Bee Gees Epitomize Disco Men**

In order to understand what disco masculinity was about and the tensions it precipitated in the black R&B industry we have to interrogate the representation of masculinity as seen in John Travolta and the Bee Gees. Travolta did not perform disco music, but as the star of *Saturday Night Fever* and the only disco persona to appear on the

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<sup>6</sup> Muriel Dimen quoted in Echols, *Shaky Ground*, 117.

cover of *Time*, Travolta became the most visible male disco icon and the most potent symbol of disco masculinity.<sup>7</sup> Before his leading role in *Saturday Night Fever*, Travolta had done Broadway and a few small film roles. He gained notable fame as “the tough, macho ‘Sweathog’” Vinnie Barbarino on the television sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter*, similar to but not nearly as complex a character as Tony Manero. A feature on the star in *Time* magazine explained that “[Travolta] likes slipping into his wise cracking, tough-tender role,” and that he was being called “the successor to David Cassidy and Donnie and Marie Osmond,” three of the least macho or tough teen idols in the entertainment industry.<sup>8</sup> More than a full year before *Saturday Night Fever*’s release, Travolta’s image was that of a man who projected a masculinity comfortable with both tough and tender components. While Travolta the actor, through his character of Tony Manero, equated disco with an interesting personality mix that was generally more tough than tender, Travolta the person, through his image in the press, came off as having more tender leanings—a twenty-three-year-old Scientologist from an acting family, Travolta was back on the *Saturday Night Fever* set just days after the tragic loss of his first true love, forty-one-year-old actress Diana Hyland, claiming that it is what she would have wanted. The two—actor and person—were easily conflated,<sup>9</sup> but whether a fan idolized Vinnie Barbarino, Tony Manero, or John Travolta himself, the blend of macho stud with sensitive shy-boy was relevant.

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<sup>7</sup> John Travolta cover, *Time*, 3 April 1978, <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19780403,00.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Show Business, “Sweathog Heartthrob,” *Time*, 26 July 1976, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,914419,00.html>.

<sup>9</sup> A reader wrote *Time* complaining, “I am not impressed with Travolta. His *Saturday Night Fever* is a racist, sexist and offensive film. It has a Neanderthal mentality with 1970s vulgarity.” He seems to have projected his offenses with the film’s subject matter onto Travolta himself. Jefe Harde, Letters, “Travolta Fever,” *Time*, 24 April 1978, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,916104,00.html>.

John Travolta combined the different strands of masculinity that cultural studies scholars Angela McRobbie and Simon Frith described in their classic 1978 essay, “Rock and Sexuality.”<sup>10</sup> They argued that cock rock constructed a masculine sexuality that was active, aggressive, boastful, and objectifying of women as sexual conquests through a presentation focused on volume, drums and phallic guitars. On the other hand, teeny-bop rock, also called pop rock, was less physical and less aggressive, constructing sexuality as spiritual and emotional through a more subdued presentation and ballads directed to women and often identified by the rock establishment as feminine. By the mid-1960s, these constructions had become pronounced as rock criticism solidified a cannon that valorized rock as a white, masculine domain of serious art form that lauded the macho rebel image and included feminized pop and other musics (including black dance music) only on the margins.<sup>11</sup> Elvis in the 1950s could be a tender and tough masculine icon, but in the mid-1960s, the rock world celebrated the more blatant machoism of the Rolling Stones as “the greatest rock and roll band in the world,” while their fans belittled the Beatles as pop.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, while countercultural rock opened up space for new

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<sup>10</sup> Angela McRobbie with Simon Frith, “Rock and Sexuality,” in Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1978, New York: Routledge, 2000), 137-158. Also see Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), esp. 227-242.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the development of this cannon see Carolyn Krasnow, “The Development of Aesthetic Ideology in Popular Music: Rock and Disco in the Nineteen Seventies,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999); Marion Leonard, *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse and Girl Power* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); and Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture, and the Politics of Sound* (New York: Routledge, 1999), esp. chps. 3 and 4. Gilbert and Pearson go on to use Richard Dyer’s classic article, “In Defense of Disco,” to explore how disco music and culture can do more than simply reverse cultural marginalization, but “disrupt the discursive systems which fix sex and gender according to the binary oppositions man/woman, masculine/feminine, gay/straight” (101). My analysis grounds itself in a context where these binaries still existed, but shows how disco did work to complicate and upset them (as well as racial differences) for straight men.

<sup>12</sup> Elvis as tender and tough informed by Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 157-158; Frith, *Sound Effects*, 238-239 and Sue Wise, “Sexing Elvis,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, eds., Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 390-399. On Stones v. Beatles see Leerom Medovoi, “Mapping the Rebel Image: Postmodernism and the Masculinist Politics of Rock in the U.S.A.,” *Cultural Critique* no. 20

possibilities of masculine representation, including the performance of androgyny, a dominant trope remained the masculinist presentation of the rock rebel as sexual stud through the loud, powerful delivery of misogynist lyrics focused on his own pleasure.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, the uncomplicated categorization of rock masculinities as either cock rock or pop rock is not without its problems and simplifications, but as rock scholar Marion Leonard has pointed out, “arguing that it is necessary to be attendant to the complexities of rock music practice and consumption does not deny the existence of the attitudes that Frith and McRobbie outline.”<sup>14</sup> That they published their work in the middle of this dissertation’s studied era suggests that the attitudes have particular currency for understanding the relevance of disco men like Travolta.

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(Winter 1991-1992): 174 and Ruth Padel, *I’m A Man: Sex, Gods, and Rock ‘N’ Roll* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 3.

<sup>13</sup> See Medovoi, “Mapping the Rebel Image,” on the continued strength of masculinist aspects of late 1960s and 1970s rock. He argues that a new kind of masculinity did not come to hold a significant position in rock until the end of the 1970s. Moreover, not only did androgynous jumpsuits with tight pants and chest-exposing tops often reinforce aspects of masculine virility; in taking on (mostly) sartorial aspects of femininity but still performing macho music and misogynist lyrics, groups like the Rolling Stones seemed to only further belittle the femininity they appropriated—using it as “just another weapon in the band’s armoury of threats to society’s norms” rather than an attempt at redefining the masculine ideal as more tender, affectionate, feminine, if you will. For further thoughts on androgyny in rock, see Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), esp. 15-18, quote from 16; Robert Wasler, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993) and Thomas Maxwell Shore, “Androgynous Geographies of the Body: Popular Music and 1960s Counter-culture,” *Thomas Maxwell Shore’s Blog*, <http://thomasmxwellshore.wordpress.com/androgynous-geographies-of-the-body-popular-music-and-1960s-counter-culture/>. For more on misogyny in Rolling Stones lyrics see Jim Curtis, *Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music and Society, 1954-1984* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), chp. 16; Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Karen Durbin, “Can a Feminist Love the World’s Greatest Rock and Roll Band?” *Ms.*, October 1974. Durbin answers her question affirmatively, defending their sexism as ambivalent, complicated theater, that acknowledged women as sexual beings, a point that McRobbie and Frith also make.

<sup>14</sup> Leonard, *Gender in the Music Industry*, 25. Susan Fast also criticizes the work of Frith and McRobbie by pointing out, “there is no question that on one level these images can be interpreted as representations of machismo and that men might identify with the display of power. . . . but female fans responses to these images . . . reveal how they are also a source of erotic pleasure for women.” And Theodore Gracyk critiques their reading as essentialist, attempting to show how rock should not be seen as solely or inherently masculine. Despite such criticisms, their work remains foundational for many studies on popular music. See Fast, “Gender and Sexuality in Led Zeppelin: A Woman’s View of Pleasure and Power in Hard Rock,” *American Music* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 245-199, esp. 276 and Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

There is no denying that Travolta was a sex symbol of macho proportions, his sexual power representing the commodified sexuality of the “new morality” and reinforcing his status as masculine icon of the disco era. Travolta’s sex appeal was so representative of the time that film critic and leading proponent of the auteur theory of criticism Andrew Sarris said, “Travolta’s is the sexual swagger of the ‘70s.”<sup>15</sup> Beyond his confident “swagger,” some women sought to commodify Travolta in the same way culture had objectified them for years: “You give us Cheryl Tiegs in a fishnet bathing suit, but not John Travolta in his black bikinis. Give women something to ogle too,” wrote Nancy Martini of Sacramento to *Time*.<sup>16</sup> Martini’s reference to a scene in *Saturday Night Fever* where Tony Manero wakes in nothing but his black bikini briefs after a night of dancing makes it evident that the movie had done much to advance Travolta’s sex-symbol status. In fact, Deney Terrio, who taught Travolta how to disco dance for the film, claimed, “I wanted to make John Travolta look like Valentino—cocky, brash, but a lover, one that loves hard.” The effect was so strong that for some people, “John’s innate sexuality is at times so marked as to be almost threatening.”<sup>17</sup> With an “almost threatening” sexuality that consisted of a cocky and brash swagger in parallel with the masculine tradition of cock rock, such commentary on Travolta’s sexuality serves as evidence that, at least in the eyes of some observers, the men of disco hardly stripped themselves of their machoism.

Yet, even in the character of Tony Manero, and especially in the image he cultivated through the entertainment media, John Travolta managed to associate disco

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Sarris, “Ethnic Fever,” *Village Voice*, 26 December 1977, 41. The auteur theory of criticism holds that a film reflects the personal vision of the director.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Martini, Letters, Travolta Fever, *Time*, 24 April 1978, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,916104,00.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Burke, “John Travolta: Hollywood’s New Sex Symbol,” *Cosmopolitan*, August 1978, 179.



and his own masculinity with something more complex and less threatening than what his sex symbol image would suggest. Travolta also projected an image that meshed with the more vulnerable concept of sexuality associated with feminine-identified pop rock. The press described Travolta as generally modest and selective when it came to discussions of sex and relationships. “Mention sex to him and he is apt to blush, squirm, or grin suggestively,” commented cultural critic Frank Rose in the *Village Voice*. Rose then went on to describe both Tony Manero and the actor who played him as “something of a tease”—Tony “only unzips for two” of the many possible female conquests he could have in the movie, and Travolta refused to appear naked in the film but compromised with the bikini underwear scene.<sup>18</sup> Former girlfriend Marilu Henner described Travolta as “a one-woman man, very selective. He's not the kind of person you worry about at a party,” and Travolta told *Playboy* he was “a very sexual person” but that that did not necessarily mean he was promiscuous.<sup>19</sup> Travolta may have been a commodified sex symbol within the “new morality,” but he chose not to adopt the macho trappings of one-night stands and multiple sexual conquests that many single men celebrated within that permissive sexual atmosphere. Few would describe Travolta’s sexuality as passive, but a visible icon of something as sexually decadent as disco purporting more restrained sexual practices opened the door for definitions of male sexuality that could include adjectives other than active, aggressive, or threatening. Travolta and his commentators did not reference feminism or liberation when making these statements, but his image seemed to

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<sup>18</sup> Frank Rose, “Travolta Puts Out,” *Village Voice*, 19 December 1977, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Henner quoted in “High Steppin’ to Stardom,” *Time*, 3 April 1978, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,919534-6,00.html>; Judson Klinger, Playboy Interview: John Travolta, *Playboy*, December 1978, 104, 106. *Time* also talked about how “A lot of the fans are young and pretty, but Travolta resists temptation. ‘Before I was famous, I had what you would call one-night experiences,’ he reflects. ‘But I find these are much more exciting in my fantasies than in reality.’”

be one that took into account the tensions and confusions sexual revolution and women's liberation had caused in the understanding of "proper" sexual behaviors of men and women. He seemed to play with the double standard of promiscuous men as studs and promiscuous women as whores and offered a new understanding of sexuality that was both active and passive, dictated by personal conviction. Travolta helped redefine macho to mean something that was more in tune with the gender context of the times.

The combination of real-life John Travolta and his on-screen disco character provided masculine options interpreted as everything from sexually threatening and misogynist to sexily sensitive and vulnerable. Tony Manero portrayed the trappings of mythologized working-class masculinity. He was a tough guy who sprinkled his conversation with four-letter words while smoking and drinking with his buddies—all things that did not characterize John Travolta, "though many of [his] fans would like to believe otherwise."<sup>20</sup> Yet, even Tony chose to escape from his problems in ways that did not fit into his otherwise masculine mold—"through dancing, through music and grace rather than through hammering an opponent with boxing gloves, which was the *Rocky* solution."<sup>21</sup> In Travolta's case, his threateningly macho sexuality and sex-symbol image were tempered by praise of his traits that seemed more feminine-identified. For example,

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<sup>20</sup> Frank Rich, "The Year of Travolta," *Seventeen*, November 1978, 151. I do not mean to suggest that Tony Manero presented a fixed or universal working-class manhood that defined all working-class men as macho, but rather that he represented a kind of working-class masculinity that had become mythologized in the American imagination. Indeed, Tony's own masculinity was complex and variable. For more on the tough-guy image in American culture see Peter Biskind and Barbara Ehrenreich, "Machismo and Hollywood's Working Class," in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, ed. Donald Lazere (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 201-215; Derek Nystrom, *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Rupert Wilkinson, *American Tough: The Tough-Guy Tradition and American Character* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984). Wilkinson argues that while the "sharpest depictions" of toughness in media have been of lower-class protagonists, "the resistance of American society to class consciousness and proletarianism has worked against the idea of a specific lower class toughness." See pages 18-19.

<sup>21</sup> Joan Juliet Buck, "New Hero: He Flies, Dreams, Dances," *Vogue*, May 1978, 239.

*Vogue* magazine made a big deal out of the fact that “Travolta would readily describe himself as a dreamer” and claimed that “[his] vulnerability is one of his greatest assets.”<sup>22</sup> Travolta was sexy *because* he came off as sensitive. Some people might find his sexuality to be macho and threatening; as journalist Tom Burke described, “Travolta’s force is physical, not-quite-accessibly sexual: he burns at a hotter temperature than the human mean.” Yet, Burke also recognized that “his sexuality is a marked ingenuousness, an almost callow vulnerability.”<sup>23</sup> Lily Tomlin reinforced this as the source of Travolta’s sex appeal in an oft-reported quote: “The sensitivity and the sexuality are very strong. It’s as if he has every dichotomy—masculinity, femininity, refinement, crudity. You see him, you fall in love a little bit.”<sup>24</sup> That Tomlin, an actress known for her feminist-leaning cultural productions and individualist nature, found the mix of masculine and feminine in her *Moment by Moment* co-star to be his most appealing asset speaks to how Travolta’s redefinition of macho and ideal masculinity was one that fit well into an era of various liberation movements. John Travolta, *the* male icon of disco, mixed character traits in a way that redefined masculine as tough yet gentle, sexually active yet innocent. The idolization and various possible interpretations of both Tony and Travolta meant that there was a broad spectrum of masculine identities found on disco dance floors across the country.

The soundtrack for his hit film, dominated by the music of an Australian trio of brothers, the Bee Gees, reinforced the new masculine ideal of tough-yet-tender John Travolta. The two masculine images matched each other very well: “The fundamental

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 239 and 264.

<sup>23</sup> Tom Burke, “Travolta: A Workaholic Becomes a Film Phenomenon,” *Chicago Tribune*, 15 June 1978.

<sup>24</sup> Tomlin quoted in “High Steppin’ to Stardom.” Other iterations of the same quote appear in Rich, “Year of Travolta,” 113 and “The 25 Most Intriguing People of 1978: John Travolta,” *People*, 25 December 1978 – 1 January 1979, 100.

note of the Bee Gees, the note of injured or embittered innocence, does match perfectly the sweet, sensitive, and totally vulnerable personality portrayed so engagingly by John Travolta on the screen,” described *Esquire* music writer Albert Goldman.<sup>25</sup> The Bee Gees’ music for *Saturday Night Fever* conveyed the confusion of both a hyper-masculine tradition coming into conflict with a liberated society that demanded female respect and a story of survival and escape in the city overshadowed by the fantasy and commercialism of a minority experience gone mainstream. The combined forces of the Bee Gees and John Travolta made the disco model of masculinity, at the industry’s peak, something of a softened masculinity that appropriated aspects of black macho through R&B music but made them accessible to a white audience. Indeed, their combined representations of new masculine ideals also induced a backlash from white, heterosexual male rock fans that included such insults as “Death to Bee Gees” T-shirts and a mockery of John Travolta in song and that ultimately prevented the Bee Gees from garnering highest praise as R&B artists.<sup>26</sup>

The brothers Gibb—oldest brother Barry, and twins Robin and Maurice—had been performing and recording together for nearly two decades before they transitioned to a disco sound and the Robert Stigwood Organization (RSO) recruited them to write and perform much of the music for the film. Having spent their childhood years in Manchester, England, the family emigrated to Australia in 1958, where their performance career began. In late 1966, the brothers returned to England, signed with Stigwood soon after, and had their first international hits in the next year. They had fallen off the top of

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<sup>25</sup> Albert Goldman, “Long-Playing Chameleons,” *Esquire*, 11 April 1978, 29.

<sup>26</sup> For more on these insults from the disco backlash see Gillian Frank, “Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 16, no. 2 (May 2007): 276-306.

the charts by 1970, but remained well known by their generation for such ballad hits as “New York Mining Disaster 1941,” “To Love Somebody,” and “I’ve Gotta Get a Message to You.” Beginning with “Jive Talkin’” on their 1975 album *Main Course*, the Bee Gees began experimenting with a new sound that would define their musical sense for the disco era. With this new sound, they sought “to make [their] music less tame. The lavish orchestras that once provided accompaniment in concert have given way to a crisp, six-man horn section to give the music more credibility. Also, for the first time, they have a backing band that plays with authority.”<sup>27</sup> Apparently, more credibility in the R&B sense meant a more “black” and masculine instrumentation with horns and rhythm, but the new Bee Gees music also included the strings and lush orchestration that had come to define much black soul in the mid-1970s, as I will discuss below.

Taken as a whole, the Bee Gees music in *Saturday Night Fever* helped bring the tensions of masculinity in disco-era soul to the vast-reaching audience of mainstream America because of its mix of macho and feminine aspects. The lyrics of “You Should Be Dancing,” for example—“My baby moves at midnight/Goes right on till the dawn/My woman takes me higher/My woman keeps me warm” and “She’s juicy and she’s trouble/She gets it to me good/My woman gives me power/Goes right down to my blood”—are undeniably macho.<sup>28</sup> They objectify women for the sexual pleasure of men in ways akin to the arrogant, masculinist songs of late-‘60s rock and soul. Yet, the *Saturday Night Fever* playlist also included songs like “More Than a Woman” and “How

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Barackman, “No Stop Sign on Bee Gees’ Musical Road,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 December 1976. For more on the Bee Gees personal and career history see Hector Cook, Andrew Mon Hughes, and Melinda Bilyeu, *The Ultimate Biography of the Bee Gees: Tales of the Brothers Gibb* (London and New York: Omnibus Press, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Music, Lyrics, and performance by Barry, Maurice, and Robin Gibb, “You Should Be Dancing,” on *Saturday Night Fever* Soundtrack, remastered compact disc (1977, Los Angeles: Polydor, 1995).

Deep Is Your Love,” which further emphasize the Bee Gees’ (and disco’s) blend of masculine and feminine. Albert Goldman described “More Than a Woman” as “revolv[ing] around one of those naively sexist I-really-need-ya-baby sentiments that are the hallmark of the modern slicked-up rhythm-‘n’-blues style,” but naively sexist with a sense of male emotion is a step above outright sexism and misogyny that had characterized much rock and R&B in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>29</sup> “How Deep Is Your Love,” on the other hand, is an expression of emotion that according to Robin Gibb is universal: “Personalities are examined in that tune, but female or male aren’t even mentioned in it. It has universal connotations and it clicks with everyone.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, both songs are “set to a rich, satiny string accompaniment,” which gave them a feminine-identified instrumentation that counterbalanced the macho, masculine, or sexist lyrics and instrumentation of their other songs.<sup>31</sup> “What Barry and his brothers have done is blend two styles that might have been considered antithetical—disco urgency and lush, middle-of-the-road romanticism,” said rock and classical music critic John Rockwell in the *New York Times*.<sup>32</sup> The combination most certainly contributed to the massive success of the movie soundtrack, in how it appealed to a variety of gender sentiments, but it was also an indication of the confusion of masculinity, with its redefinition in the wake of feminism and sexual liberation. Men still felt a need to be macho, but also wanted to be liberated, to concern themselves with their own emotions and the emotions of others.

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<sup>29</sup> Goldman, “Long-Playing Chameleons.”

<sup>30</sup> Robin Gibb quoted in Cook, Hughes, and Bilyeu, *Ultimate Biography*, 412.

<sup>31</sup> Goldman, “Long-Playing Chameleons.” I take these gendered instrumentation designations, in part, from the description of disco music in *Faking It*: “there was at times a masculine element to relentless beat. . . . But above these mechanical beats, the music was clearly feminine. The instrumentation is ethereal, with string flourishes and smooth harmonies.” See Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 238-239. I also discuss Barry White’s differentiation between masculine horns and feminine strings below.

<sup>32</sup> John Rockwell, “The Bee Gees Are Getting as Big as the Beatles,” *New York Times*, 19 March 1978.

One aspect of the Bee Gees 1970s revival that contributed to this gender blending was their use of falsetto. The falsetto register for men had a long history in black gospel and R&B music before the Bee Gees appropriated it for their own commercial success. For black vocalists the use of falsetto—as an alien register that was neither male nor female, true nor false, emitting from the singer, but not connected to his typical vocal range—was often about taking on a role of something one is not or being able to enter an “otherworld” from which to make political commentary on the real world.<sup>33</sup> By the era of late-60s soul, it had also become a sexual method of seduction in music, perhaps because it allowed otherwise masculine men, and men overly concerned with their masculinity, to express emotions otherwise attributed to the female temperament through the disembodied voice. In the case of the Bee Gees, it was an emulation of the R&B tradition, an attempt to make their music marketable to the disco audience and reinvent themselves as musicians.<sup>34</sup> Considering the blatant commerciality of *Saturday Night Fever*—“‘We’re fully aware,’ says Barry [Gibb] ‘that our music is almost totally commercial’”—their falsetto would not have had the same meaning as its use in the black tradition.<sup>35</sup> Instead, it only emphasized their image of wholesome vulnerability and innocence, which helped soften the otherwise macho lyrics—making them popular in a society that was more open to liberated manhood while at the same time opening them to ridicule within the white rock community.

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<sup>33</sup> Anne-Lise François makes an “argument for falsetto as artifice, as a vamping and performance of otherness, and, by extension, as a metaphor for alternative, fictive spaces which uncover the untruth of the real.” See François, “Fakin’ It/Makin’ It: Falsetto’s Bid for Transcendence in 1970s Disco Highs,” *Perspectives of New Music*, 33 (Winter/Summer 1995): 442-457, quote from 447.

<sup>34</sup> François, “Fakin’ It/Makin’ It,” 449-450.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Windeler, “For a Song: The Bee Gees, Pop’s Golden Oldies, Find There Really Is a Fountain of Youth in Florida,” *People*, 6 February 1978, 77.

“Stayin’ Alive” is a good example. Despite its invocation of universality (“whether you’re a brother or whether you’re a mother”), lyrically, this song is truly masculine. *Los Angeles Times* pop music editor Robert Hilburn described it as follows: “Set against the song’s seductive rhythm, the lyrics convey the titillation and every-night’s-a-new-chance undercurrent that is so much a part of disco appeal: ‘Music loud and women warm/I’ve been kicked around since I was born/And now it’s all right, it’s OK/...I’ll live to see another day . . .’”<sup>36</sup> Every night’s a new chance not just for survival in the city but for the possibility to bed another “warm” woman after impressing her with the dancing skills of this self-proclaimed “woman’s man.” The falsetto, however, served to emphasize not the sexual proclivity or manly struggle of the main character, but “became an aural metaphor for the anxious human spirit: an attestation of innocence, a cry for help, a sob of nostalgia.”<sup>37</sup> And it was only because of the “workable counterbalance in a springy, clearly articulated electric bass” that rock critic and former RCA executive Stephen Holden found the “metallic shriek” bearable at all.<sup>38</sup>

To many people, especially a mainstream audience unfamiliar with its use in black music, the Bee Gees falsetto likely was perplexing and merely reminded them of female voices. “This was a very macho song but portrayed by almost feminine voices,” said English record producer, Sir George Martin, describing it as “a kind of paradox.”<sup>39</sup> It made them seem less than manly to those who did not accept it as the proper register for a cry for help (or less than manly for even needing to make that cry). As *New York*

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Hilburn, “‘Stayin’ Alive’ Tabbed Top Single,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 December 1978.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Holden, “The Bee Gees Millennium Fever: Glenn Miller Revisited,” *Rolling Stone*, 5 April 1979, 68.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* Holden was commenting on how the Bee Gees continued use of falsetto in their follow-up album, *Spirits Having Flown*, was not as well counterbalanced.

<sup>39</sup> Cook, Hughes, and Bilyeu, *Ultimate Biography*, 415-6.



*Times* music and film critic Janet Maslin explained, “This kind of delivery lends itself most often to the objection most often voiced by the group’s detractors, the Alvin and the chipmunks complaint—that is, the notion that a grown man singing a song of woe at the top of his register sounds, at best, a bit peculiar.”<sup>40</sup> For three white men who already had a reputation of relatively high voices singing syrupy ballads, the effectiveness of an “otherworldly” falsetto was lost on a mainstream audience who enjoyed the music for its danceable beat but missed the story of rugged struggle (which was also the case with the film).<sup>41</sup> The falsetto merely emphasized their innocence and sensitivity. It would have come off as more manly to sing a song like “Stayin’ Alive” in their regular register, but as it stands, it serves as a popular culture incarnation of a society coming to terms with the idea of liberated and emotional men.

By the summer of 1979, with the release of their follow-up album *Spirits Having Flown*, many reviewers agreed that the Bee Gees had “just about mined that falsetto for all it’s worth.”<sup>42</sup> It had succeeded in helping them break into the disco market with their own interpretation of disco’s R&B roots, but this interpretation was not easily classified. The Bee Gees tried hard to assert an R&B identity in terms of both influence and delivery, often claiming, in the words of Robin Gibb, “The black influence was our original one.”<sup>43</sup> Yet, the music industry already knew of the Bee Gees as three white balladeers from Australia, which tempered their attempts at taking on a black musical

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<sup>40</sup> Janet Maslin, “Why the Bee Gees Sound So Good,” *New York Times*, 18 February 1979. Jefre Harde, of Hunt Woods, Mich., did write in to *People* (Mail, “Bee Gees,” 27 Aug 1979, 4) describing the Bee Gees as “Those ‘Chipmunks incarnate.’”

<sup>41</sup> “‘It became such a phenomenon, the whole *Saturday Night Fever* thing,’ Robin added, ‘that very few people realise it’s to do with anything but dance. The lyrics don’t talk about dance at all. The lyrics very obviously state the scenario of survival in the city, and it’s not about disco dancing at all.’” See Cook, Hughes, Bilyen, *Ultimate Biography*, 416.

<sup>42</sup> Music, *Playboy*, June 1979, 49.

<sup>43</sup> Mitchell Glazer, “The Rise and Fall and Rise of the Brothers Gibb,” *Playboy*, August 1978, 194.

identity. Moreover, in the mid- to late-1970s, as white masculine rock moved in the direction of “head music” while maintaining the sexist trappings of cock rock, the Bee Gees were taking on a style of R&B that was not only dance music but was also far from the raucous and raw R&B that groups like the Rolling Stones had appropriated a decade earlier and that the rock cannon still emulated as rock ‘n’ roll’s “authentic” roots. Rock critics, recognizing the effort to take on the R&B mold but seeing it as a whitened version of the genre, classified the Bee Gees’ new music as “blue-eyed disco,” talking about their “clean, white funkiness,” and “polished R&B influence” at the same time that they claimed their instrumentals and vocal harmonies “out-soul all but the best contemporary soul groups.”<sup>44</sup> The group received next-to-no coverage in the black-oriented publications of the day. Unlike KC and the Sunshine Band who many mistook as black before they began touring (or could fall back on a majority of black members), the Bee Gees, while hugely successful on the pop charts with their R&B-inspired dance beats, were less successful at garnering acceptance as true R&B artists.

### **Black Power and Black Music**

Part of the reluctance to classify the Bee Gees as R&B was also a result of the confused and changing nature of R&B at the time and in relation to disco. Critics often faulted disco’s musical sound for being in direct contradiction to the most popular black music of the preceding era. As historian Brian Ward argues, black music always held a significant connection to the black freedom struggle, but in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that connection became much more directly and specifically engaged with the

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<sup>44</sup> Top Album Picks, Spotlight, Bee Gees, *Children of the World*, *Billboard*, 18 September 1976, 62. The term “blue-eyed disco” is most likely a derivative of the more commonly used phrase “blue-eyed soul.” Stephen Demorest, “The Bee Gees Are Back and They’re Having a Ball,” *New York Times*, 28 November 1976, 118; Bob Cruz, Dear Playboy, “Beatles v. Bee Gees,” *Playboy*, November 1978, 19.

political and social struggle of African Americans.<sup>45</sup> These so-called “message songs,” which tended to have socially conscious lyrics sung over a darker sound than that of the soul music immediately before or just after, grew out of and reflected the tenets of the Black Power movement, the prevailing strand of the black freedom struggle between about 1965 and 1975.<sup>46</sup> Black Power was a collection of ideologies that rejected the efficacy of integration and assimilation as methods to advance the lives of black people. Focused on racial solidarity and the collective advancement of the black community, some Black Power beliefs espoused violence, others community programs, to gain black political power; its encouragement of pride in black identity emphasized cultural preservation and expression relatively free from white influence.<sup>47</sup> As Brian Ward has argued, black music became a cultural expression of these ideologies:

Having once largely skirted political issues, the Rhythm and Blues of the later 1960s and early 1970s was full of songs explicitly about the struggle, about the social, political & economic plight of black Americans, and about the state of American race relations. . . . Even the sound of soul seemed to darken audibly during this time of rising nationalist sentiment.<sup>48</sup>

Black music of the late 1960s and early 1970s—especially the soul and funk records of artists like James Brown, Marvin Gaye, George Clinton, and Sly Stone—lyrically addressed the resentment, despair, and anger that black Americans felt about the

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<sup>45</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), esp. 3-4 and 339-415.

<sup>46</sup> Certain scholarship has readjusted this timeline, especially in linking the eras of civil rights and Black Power. See, for example, Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). The standard 1965-1975 timeframe remains significant for this dissertation because of its relation to dominant musical tropes.

<sup>47</sup> For more on Black Power see Martin, “Be Real Black For Me”; Waldo E. Martin Jr., *No Coward Soldiers: Black Cultural Politics and Postwar America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement in American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Schulman, *The Seventies*, 62-64.

<sup>48</sup> Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 339.

dissolution of the integration ideal and their still-oppressed position in society. Through the incorporation of earthier sounds and gruff vocals plus powerful, African rhythms, beats, and drums, the black music of this pre-disco era not only sounded more dark and ominous; it also acted as an expression of collective culture and racial pride.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, as reflections of both a political philosophy and commentary on black life, message songs tended to speak to the tenets of masculinity and sexuality as defined by the Black Power movement. A legacy of slavery and racism had stripped black men of the most traditional (read: white-identified) markers of manhood—full political and economic citizenship in a white-dominated society—and left them with a deep concern over defining themselves as “real men.” The 1965 release of the Moynihan report—with its implications that “a tangle of pathology,” stemming from matriarchal black families, was the biggest threat to the stability of the black family—only exacerbated these anxieties by making black men and women ever more worried about finding ways to grant black men their “rightful” place as family patriarch.<sup>50</sup> By the late 1960s and into the 1970s, black masculinity, as defined by the dictates of Black Power and presented in the media through forms like the blaxploitation film genre, was about advancement of the black community as well as masculine self-advancement through courage, power, and virility—aggressive and active men helped along by passive, domestic and submissive women, in need of male protection and appreciative of the black man’s sexual prowess.

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Shapiro describes this music alternately as “paranoid soul” and “radical soul” and gives a very insightful and detailed analysis of the era’s black musical sound. See Shapiro, “Disco and the Soul Continuum,” chapter 4 in *Turn the Beat Around*. For further analysis and description of black music in the Black Power era see Ward, chapter 9, “‘Tell it like it is’: soul, funk and sexual politics in the black power era,” in *Just My Soul Responding*.

<sup>50</sup> For more on the Moynihan Report and its effect on gender identity and roles in the black population see Steve Estes, “The Moynihan Report,” in *I am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) and Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

Indeed, many Black Power leaders associated white men with the feminine (passivity and submission) and extolled straight black men as symbols of active, sovereign, and phallic masculinity. Many black men aspired to meet that masculine image in the 1970s, and it caused tension in black gender relations.<sup>51</sup>

The Black Power movement's preoccupation with strong and virile masculinity, combined with the general opening of sexual morality and continued structural inequalities faced by the African American population, created a unique moment for black sexuality in the late 1960s and 1970s. As non-marital sexual activity became more acceptable across society and Black Power masculinity emphasized virility, many black men competed with each other to prove their sexual manhood.<sup>52</sup> From a young age, black boys learned to "try to master the girls sexually. . . . [and] rank each other according to their sexual prowess."<sup>53</sup> Men came to see dating as a goal-oriented activity with sexual gratification being the endpoint, and it was understood (even if criticized) within the black community, that "a man in the poolroom, the bull session or other male hangout may lose considerable face and risk ridicule if he admits to deep affection for a woman. Thus men try typically to affect an attitude of shallow emotion in relation to

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<sup>51</sup> For more information on Black Power and black masculinity see Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1979); Steve Estes, "'The Baddest Motherfuckers Ever to Set Foot Inside of History,'" in *I am a Man!*; Leerom Medovoi, "A Yippie-Panther Pipe Dream: Rethinking Sex, Race, and the Sexual Revolution," in *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, ed. Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 133-178; and Stephen Ward, "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics," in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 123-128. Also see Bonnie Allen, "The Macho Men: What Ever Happened to Them?" *Essence*, February 1979, 62.

<sup>52</sup> Two important shifts in behavior and attitudes that Robert Staples, Ph.D., observed in his studies of black sexuality in the 1970s were a merging of black and white sexual activity and that "sexual liberalism signaled to men that one could pursue all the sex possible." See Staples, "Black Male Sexuality: Has It Changed?" *Ebony*, August 1983 and Staples, "The New Sex vs. the Old Ideals," *Essence*, May 1981, 121.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Tyson and Joanne Tyson, "Sex and the Black Woman," *Ebony*, August 1977, 104.

women beyond the more socially acceptable sexual interest.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in a society where most blacks lived amongst the violence of the inner city, experienced limited economic advancement, and were imprisoned in disproportionate numbers, black men, especially those of the professional class, used their relative scarcity to hold the sexual power and endorsed a sexual double standard in which black women should be happy to share their men while remaining monogamous and devoted wives and lovers.<sup>55</sup> As black feminist Michelle Wallace described black macho in 1978, “The black man’s sexuality and the physical fact of his penis were the major evidence of his manhood and the purpose of it.”<sup>56</sup> Women were meant to fulfill their role in the revolution by remaining submissive to black men’s desires; going against the grain threatened to weaken black men’s power and masculinity.<sup>57</sup> The revival of black macho and sexism in the male-performed soul and funk of the late 1960s and early 1970s expressed these concepts of Black Power masculinity, patriarchy, and sexual competition.

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<sup>54</sup> Nathan Hare, Ph.D., “The Many Ways Men ‘Pimp’ Their Women” *Ebony*, November 1977, 145. Robert Staples, Ph.D., came to similar conclusions after interviewing black males for a study on sexual attitudes, the results of which were published in the May 1981 issue of *Essence*. He quoted professional black males who expressed no desire to date women, but believed they should sleep with them whenever possible. See Staples, “New Sex vs. the Old Ideals,” 83.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Tyson and Tyson, “Sex and the Black Woman,” and Joanne H. Tyson, R.N., B.S.N. and Richard F. Tyson, M.D., “Sexuality and the New Generation” *Ebony*, August 1978. Black actor Leon Isaac Kennedy told *Black Stars* in 1981, that he did not believe in monogamy and felt that because of the man shortage, women should learn to share their men. See Connie Johnson, “Three Male Stars Share Views on Love and Black Women,” *Black Stars*, February 1981. Also see Connie Johnson, “Is There Really A Sexual Revolution?” *Black Stars*, October 1977 and Staples, “New Sex vs. the Old Ideals.” Both reference how the sexual double standard remained strong among black males.

<sup>56</sup> Wallace, *Black Macho*, 62.

<sup>57</sup> See *Ibid.* Such black macho sentiments caused significant gender tensions in the 1970s as revealed by discourse in the black press, but subsequent scholars have sought to complicate the overwhelming masculine narrative of Black Power by showing how women held leadership roles and were active participants in the movement. See, for example, Countryman, *Up South*; and the essays in Part IV, “From Civil Rights to Black Power: African American Women and Nationalism” in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, eds. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

Over the span of only a few decades in the postwar era, black music had undergone multiple significant transitions, which can help us place this revival. As the transcendent emotions of gospel came together with the secular earthiness of the blues in 1940s rhythm and blues, black music until the mid-1950s regularly featured a raunchy sexuality that spoke of partying, sexual pleasures, promiscuity, and frequent misogynist lyrics from blues men. But in a segregated music market, this black music rarely crossed over to the mainstream pop charts or did so in the form of white (often muted) cover versions. During the height of integrationist civil rights, the most successful black music found its way onto the mainstream charts by tending toward a focus on love, marriage, and fidelity for both men and women. Through figures like Smokey Robinson who sang emotively of romance and love, but rarely sex, Motown dominated this love-centric sweet soul, and critics have since paradoxically praised it for its commitment to black economic self-sufficiency and chart placement while dismissing it as less “authentic,” watered-down soul that was too white and commercialized. With the rise of Black Power in the mid-1960s, the darker, earthier, more politically conscious, sexualized and patriarchal sounds of soul and funk supplanted Motown and sweet soul on the charts. Certainly, these descriptions remain generalizations: a variety of romantic and raunchy songs coexisted in any given period, and any given male soul artist (and his non-musical brother) was neither exclusively sexist nor completely excluded the possibility of romance in his musical renditions of interpersonal relationships. But the misogyny and sexual objectification of Black Power predominated in the black music that preceded disco.<sup>58</sup> Disco then emerged as something of a parallel to the sweet soul of Motown, but

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<sup>58</sup> This history of male R&B is especially indebted to Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*. For more extended

more sexualized in a new era. It combined a driving beat with a sweeter sound and challenged black macho with an active male sexuality that was also about love, tenderness, and an acknowledgement of female pleasure.

Philadelphia International Records (PIR), headed by Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, as the leading practitioner of message music and representative of the soul and disco sound of the early 1970s, was intimately embroiled in the musical representation of this Black Power rhetoric of patriarchy.<sup>59</sup> Understanding PIR as a contemporary symbol of a black nationalism and self-sufficiency that had coexisted and competed with ideas of integration and assimilation for nearly a century, Weldon McDougal III, Director of Publishing and Artist Relations, made it clear that being a black company was the most important aspect of PIR and his involvement with it.<sup>60</sup> “The main reason that I came into this business is to **be black and represent black** [emphasis in original],” he told the DJ

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discussions of these transitions in black music, see Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (New York: Times Books, 1984); Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); Arthur Kempton, *Boogaloo: The Quintessence of American Popular Music* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003); and Shapiro, “Disco and the Soul Continuum,” in *Turn the Beat Around*. Thaddeus Russell has documented how civil rights ideology, which dominated the movement between 1954 and 1965, created a public discourse that prioritized black middle-class values and heteronormativity, muting the discussion of nonheteronormative behavior that frequented black public discourse and popular culture prior to and after that time. See Russell, “The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (March 2008): 101-128. Ward points out that female soul artists articulated complex responses to black macho and the tenets of Black Power, including both capitulation to and criticism of black macho, but many of his examples are pulled from late-1970s disco fare (381-387). I will argue in chapter 5 that while this oppositional expression found its roots in the Black Power era, disco was its high point.

<sup>59</sup> What follows is a brief history of PIR with a focus on its innovative sound and gender representations. For more detail on the general history of PIR see John A. Jackson, *A House on Fire: The Rise and Fall of Philadelphia Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>60</sup> Self-sufficiency and assimilation had been two competing but interdependent philosophies of black advancement at least since the turn of twentieth century. Rarely, however, did any individual or institution practice either philosophy in its pure form and without complications and contradictions. For further discussion of these complications, see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). For just a few examples of these concepts at work in the music industry, see George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues*; Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown & the Cultural Politics of Detroit*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Gerald Early, *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).



trade magazine *Discotheekin'*. He felt that the white dominated music industry did not yet respect blacks in the industry and was proud to be part of a company that could represent his race proudly through “happiness and goodwill.”<sup>61</sup> Black writers like Jamaica Kincaid commended this representation of the black community. Kincaid liked Gamble and Huff because “they are the best of something Big and Grand and Wonderful. They are Black. They are Strong. . . . They know their roots and they like them.”<sup>62</sup> After Motown’s lengthy domination of the black music industry, which Kincaid believed did nothing creatively for black music and did not reflect or say anything about the black experience, Kincaid was excited to have a new prominent black record company that more “accurately” spoke to the reality of black life.

Part of what made up the message of PIR that Kincaid praised so highly were the strongly religious and patriarchal beliefs of its leaders, especially chief songwriter Kenneth Gamble. As cultural studies scholar Mark Anthony Neal has previously noted, “Gamble and Huff specialized in recordings that featured powerful male voices who often reinforced patriarchal norms.”<sup>63</sup> Gamble himself reiterated this stance during an interview for *Rolling Stone*. Tom Vickers reported, “To Gamble, the woman’s role is ‘to help and support, but don’t make the decisions. She’s not the one that runs the house.’” Gamble talked about how these roles were “the universal order of things” according to the scriptures; he believed that “the only way woman will be able to submit is to run into

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<sup>61</sup> “Weldon McDougal III,” *Discotheekin'*, February 1976, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, “Gamble & Huff: The Men Who Invented TSOP,” *Village Voice*, 28 July 1975, 66. Kincaid would viciously critique Labelle in a *Ms.* magazine article later that year for what she viewed as capitulation to white expectations and for self-describing their music within “a musical category that no self-respecting black performer aspires to be in.” See Jamaica Kincaid, “Music: The Labelle Hustle,” *Ms.*, September 1975.

<sup>63</sup> Neal, *What the Music Said*, 118. Neal goes on to offer an insightful analysis of “Be For Real” by Harold Melvin and the Bluenotes, describing it as a critique of the black feminist movement and as fitting into “the general patriarchy that grounded many Gamble and Huff narratives.” Also see Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 142.

a real man,” and he “sniff[ed]” about “those junior boys that don’t want to be men.” And while Gamble neglected to elaborate, it appeared to Vickers that many of these “junior boys” belonged to the disco clientele—a clientele that PIR itself had courted as a leading label in the early years of the disco market’s expansion.<sup>64</sup>

While PIR’s music was centrally concerned with the message, it was also geared to a crossover audience and dancing public and would thus shape the emerging new sound of soul and, in turn, disco, in the 1970s. Weldon McDougal III may have adamantly argued that he joined the music business to “be black and represent black,” but the company he worked for was also interested in—and successful at—making commercial music that appealed to a broad base. “We’ve never thought along the lines of a black music thing,” said Gamble. He described their music as having “all the ingredients to appeal to all audiences, black and white.”<sup>65</sup> The string of crossover hits they had with groups such as the O’Jays and Harold Melvin and the Bluenotes in the first half of the 1970s proved that to be the case. Yet, most of the songs recorded by these groups maintained the social poignancy that other less-commercially driven black performers and producers achieved. The O’Jays could “send out a serious message and still keep people dancing happily in discos and rocking in the aisles at every concert,” praised the Chicago black newspaper, the *Daily Defender*, in 1975.<sup>66</sup> As Ward puts it, “it

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<sup>64</sup> Tom Vickers, “Gamble & Huff: It’s Got a Good Beat, and You Can Pray to It,” *Rolling Stone*, 20 May 1976, 22. Vickers’s presumption that Gamble “seemed to look at disco as a market, its clientele as an . . . embarrassment” could just as easily be a reflection of his own distaste for disco as a writer for a rock and roll magazine, which earlier that year claimed that, compared to Motown, PIR had a dearth of talent and creativity (basically the opposite of Kincaid’s view). See Dave Marsh, “Do You Wanna Dance?” *Rolling Stone*, 26 February 1976. According to the Vickers article, Gamble also wrote anti-abortion songs.

<sup>65</sup> Gamble quoted in Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 418. Originally quoted in Tony Cummings, *The Sound of Philadelphia* (London: Methuen, 1975), 108, 107.

<sup>66</sup> “O’Jays Set for Mill Run,” *Daily Defender*, 27 May 1975. PIR was not the only label to combine these two elements successfully. Musician and producer for Brunswick Records, Hamilton Bohannon also mixed

never occurred to Gamble and Huff that social messages and robust expressions of black pride and unity might be commercially disabling.”<sup>67</sup> Understanding the importance of the public space of the dance floor in facilitating communal exchange and relations, increasingly so in the 1970s, Gamble and Huff found a way to combine their messages of black pride and struggle with danceable melodies that all audiences could appreciate.<sup>68</sup>

Philadelphia International’s commercial success had much to do with the signature soul sound of Philadelphia. Whereas much socially conscious black music of the late 1960s and early 1970s was of the hard-driving, psychedelic soul or funk variety, that coming out of Philadelphia was more of a lush, orchestral soul often described as “sweet soul.” Brian Ward describes the Philly Sound as “a sort of velvet-cased soul-funk amalgam which was characterized by rich strings and horn arrangements, taut rhythm tracks, and dramatic gospel vocals delivering thoughtful, storyline lyrics.”<sup>69</sup> The strings and horns were central, giving the music a rich quality, but used to drive the music forward rather than just sweeten it, as critics would accuse imitators of doing.<sup>70</sup> The message songs of the O’Jays and Harold Melvin and the Bluenotes tend to be examples of Philly soul that maintained a denser, darker orchestration combined with message lyrics to produce music that held the same kind of tension and conflict that non-Philly soul also had—Kincaid described the music as “tense and loose, brassiness backed by

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disco with a message according to Kwame Brathwaite & Chris Policano, “A Look at the Disco Craze, Pt. 1,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 February 7 1976.

<sup>67</sup> Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 418.

<sup>68</sup> Neal, *What the Music Said*, 103, 119-120.

<sup>69</sup> Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 418. Contemporary descriptions use similar terms: “lush R&B, with concentration on the strings and horns” and “a mix of funky R&B music with colorings of violin, brass and woodwinds—if you will, a kind of orchestrated soul.” See “The Sound of Philadelphia,” *Discotheekin*, February 1976, 12 and Vickers, “Gamble & Huff,” 10.

<sup>70</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 145.

symphonic overtones.”<sup>71</sup> Yet in the early 1970s, PIR also incorporated their signature sound into non-message dance music that had a mellower, lighter sound surrounding lyrics of love and dancing. They were epitomized by the instrumental anthems of MSFB—for example, “TSOP” (better known as the theme song to *Soul Train*) and “Love is the Message”—and the soft soul stylings of PIR writer-producer Thomas Bell, who told *Rolling Stone*, “There are two things I don’t get involved in. One is religion, the other politics. That’s the difference between [Gamble’s] nature and mine.”<sup>72</sup> The steady beat, thumping bass, lush orchestration, and irresistible momentum of all PIR dance songs would come to define the stereotypical disco sound as it burst into the mainstream, and as the non-message songs in the style of Thomas Bell became more popular, they more readily defined the craze.

As PIR’s non-message songs gained popularity, they also gained imitators who made this lushly orchestrated soul with the steady beat, strings and horns a general trend in soul music that also defined the early mainstream hits of disco. Funky George of Kool and the Gang described it as musical groups trying “to science the [disco] market.”<sup>73</sup> The result, according to New York journalist Mark Jacobson was

a new genre of black rhythm-and-blues music that is totally different from the driving, maximum penetration of ‘danceable’ sixties R&B. The new songs are like big barroom fans that sweep the air around you when you dance. . . . They’re softer, more playful, almost approaching mirth. The lyrics have little to do with the blues—they’re happier, more ethereal . . . The singing . . . is lilting, spacey, filled with otherworldly falsettos. Very few tunes have bedrock, gravelly blues voices. Horn parts aren’t low-life and funky . . . they’re brassy and up.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Kincaid, “Gamble & Huff,” 66.

<sup>72</sup> Gamble quoted in Vickers, “Gamble & Huff,” 10. MSFB stood for “Mother, Father, Sister, Brother”—the PIR session orchestra. “TSOP” stood for “The Sound of Philadelphia.”

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Mark Jacobson, “Hollyw-o-o-o-d! The Return of the New York Disco,” *New York*, 1 July 1974, 51.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* Also see “Soul Sauce: Music Still Sweet, But Beat New,” *Billboard*, 13 April 1974, 34.

The early disco hits of groups like Salsoul Orchestra, Hues Corporation, and Barry White epitomized the sound. Indeed, Salsoul Orchestra recorded for Salsoul Records, which originally envisioned itself a pure disco label that recorded in the Sigma Sound Studios, also the home of PIR, and hired many PIR sessions musicians.<sup>75</sup>

At the same time that non-message sweet soul began taking over the sound of R&B, Gamble and Huff became more concerned with message songs. PIR lost its dominance of the disco charts, and its popular imitators took over. Without the overt message lyrics of PIR and Black-Power-era soul, the sweet strings and lush instrumentations of disco music that PIR had played such a role in forging came under critique by those invested in black music speaking to the black struggle. “In the past, music in the Black community was the medium, not the message. Disco transforms the message into the beat,” said Pittsburgh’s black community newspaper, claiming “the spiritual genius” [read: socio-political commentary] of black artists like Marvin Gaye and the O’Jays was being “overshadowed by the follies of the times” and disco was “one of many forms of Black collective imitation/suicide.”<sup>76</sup> One of disco’s most vocal critics, Nelson George, was willing to admit in 1978, that the disco sections of record stores could still stock “really good R&B,” but he criticized “formula” disco for featuring “that stereotyped, hi-hat drum sound and inane lyrics.”<sup>77</sup> Those blacks committed to the darker, socially-conscious message music that spoke to the struggles and communalism of the Black Power era considered the Philly Sound without the message lyrics—mainstream disco—to be “inauthentic,” commercial representations of black music.

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<sup>75</sup> For more on the growth of PIR imitators see Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 418; Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 146-149; Neal, *What the Music Said*, 120-121; and Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 168-172.

<sup>76</sup> Bobby E. Mills, “Disco Mania: Search for Meaning,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 16 August 1980, 6.

<sup>77</sup> Nelson George, “The Disco Boom and Blacks,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 January 1978.

Such critiques only became harsher as disco became increasingly mass-marketed, focused on crossover success, appropriated by whites, and dominated by female divas. Disco crossover—“a nice way of saying, caught the fancy of white people,” according to Nelson George—improved the careers and incomes of many black musical artists as they saw their hits climb the pop charts.<sup>78</sup> But it also helped white groups like Wild Cherry, David Bowie, the Bee Gees, and the Rolling Stones scale the soul charts. Taking away the black monopoly on soul concerned many music writers and personnel because they felt blacks were abandoning their unique cultural sound and, in turn, their communities. In his 1988 analysis of the evolution of R&B music, Nelson George would fault mainstream, commercial disco imitations of what had once been traditional PIR soul as “sweet, highly melodic, and unthreatening” dance music that “came to celebrate a hedonism and androgyny that contradicted their patriarchal philosophy.”<sup>79</sup> Unlike the masculine, threatening music of PIR and Black Power era R&B, crossover disco became less dark, less serious, less socially conscious, happier, sweeter, and glossier. As critics saw it, disco submitted to the demands of white society by taking on a more feminine instrumentation, especially in terms of syrupy sweet strings. Not only did this new dance music take away from the communal dialogue of struggle; submission was a trait that Black Power gender construction associated with the feminine. Moreover, female vocalists increasingly dominated disco music, singing with a strong sexual agency that contradicted both the ideals of Black Power womanhood and the dominant trends in previous R&B music. Disco from the mid- to late-1970s was music that functioned as a cultural source of gender redefinition in the black community.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 155.

## **Barry White and a New Masculine Ideal**

Disco icons in the soul arena were defining a new form of black masculinity that some in the black music industry found questionable at the same time that John Travolta and the Bee Gees were expanding the possibilities of masculinity for white men and garnering criticism from the rock establishment. Indeed, the Bee Gees rehailed their sound to a more R&B mode in the vein of PIR sweet soul that combined driving rhythm with smooth orchestration also defined by such iconic hits as Barry White's "Love's Theme." The "sweet heavily instrumental sound" and "lush, heavily orchestrated flavor" of White's music and other early cross-over disco beats, is a large part of what Nelson George faulted as the "sweet" and "unthreatening" imitation PIR dance music that contradicted the black power philosophy. Looking closely at White's music and public image we can examine one way in which black male musicians diverged from the soul standards of the Black Power era and attempted to appeal to changing and complicated gender identities in the wake of the feminist movement. Barry White's sound diverged from that of late sixties and early seventies soul men like James Brown because of how it lent a sophistication to the danceable beats and rhythms of a harder soul tradition and through its ability to combine romance with sex in a way that appealed to women's desires and pleasure without abandoning his own. Indeed, as Alice Echols has argued, James Brown's masculinity—a complicated compromise between funk and sophistication, rawness and vulnerability—became an increasingly macho display of male sexual prowess and desire over the course of his career, and his inability to combine sophistication and funk into a single track prevented him from succeeding in the disco

genre, even as the new sound built on his music's sense of rhythm and repetition.<sup>80</sup> In diverging from the rough and arrogant masculinity of iconic soul men like James Brown, White built on the sophisticated sexual anthems of precursors like Marvin Gaye and Isaac Hayes who managed to project a strong black manhood that could also express love and emotion through smooth orchestration and vulnerable lyrics. But while Hayes and Gaye tended to focus on their own sexual pleasure, White more often than not addressed his woman's as much as his own.<sup>81</sup>

Eventually known as the "Maestro of Love," Barry White grew up poor in Los Angeles with an unwed mother and generally absent father. As teenagers, he and his brother involved themselves with street gangs, alcohol, and violence. After serving jail time at the end of the 1950s, White made the decision to leave home to try his luck in the Hollywood music business and forgo the anger he felt dominated the attitudes of his brother and friends. After working various positions in and learning all he could about the music business, White received an opportunity to write and produce his own songs in 1970. He went on to become a successful composer, producer, and arranger, with hits in three different formats—his own albums, the instrumental albums of the Love Unlimited Orchestra, and with the female singing group known as Love Unlimited.<sup>82</sup>

Central to his music was the theme of love: "The theme of all of Barry White's work is love—between lovers, among friends, and even between artist and fan."<sup>83</sup> White

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<sup>80</sup> Alice Echols, "The Land of Somewhere Else: Refiguring James Brown in Seventies Disco," *Criticism* 50, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 19-41.

<sup>81</sup> For more on Hayes and Gaye see Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 23-35.

<sup>82</sup> For more on Barry White's biography see Barry White with Marc Eliot, *Love Unlimited: Insights on Life and Love* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999).

<sup>83</sup> "Record World Salutes Barry White," *Record World*, 27 December 1976, section II, 30.



believed that “Love can do things for you in many different ways . . . ‘You don’t have to just practice it at home. You can do it at your job. I don’t mean walk up to the cat you’re working with and say, ‘I love you,’ but it’s the way you treat them. That’s all got to do with love.”<sup>84</sup> By expressing these beliefs through his songwriting, White “effectively merge[d] emotion with rhythm.”<sup>85</sup> Yet, White’s music was as much about physical love, or sex, as it was about romantic love. Critics described his lyrics as “soft-core sex,” having an “obvious sex approach,” and so “sex-filled” that they “sometimes shock the pants off whomever it is he’s singing to.” It was a combination of emotion and erotica, “syrupy sexiness coupled with gyration provoking rhythms.”<sup>86</sup> By veiling his sexy lyrics with an appeal to emotive love, White suggested that he was breaking with the status quo in soul music and sexual relations by expanding the emotional realm of men.

The sound of White’s music did evoke sensitive emotion—more so than the harder soul tradition from which he broke to make it in the commercial realm. By combining lush strings and “mushy romantic music” with his sexually suggestive lyrics, White’s songs had the mixed effect in which “his big orchestra soothes you even as his voice excites you.”<sup>87</sup> Combining sex with romance, he presented an approach to sexuality for men that differed from the completely arrogant and aggressive approach of the truly macho male. But to say that Barry White only sang of playing “the ladies game,” to the detriment of the “authentically” black and patriarchal tradition of late-

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<sup>84</sup> White quoted in “Barry White: New Maestro of Love,” *Jet*, 10 April 1975, 59.

<sup>85</sup> Tom Vickers, “Disco Stars,” in *Dancing Madness*, eds. Abe Peck and Suzy Rice (New York: Anchor Press, 1976), 40.

<sup>86</sup> John Landau, Review of Barry White, *Just Another Way To Say I Love You*, *Rolling Stone*, 3 July 1975, 56; Top Album Picks, Pop, The Love Unlimited Orchestra, *Rhapsody In White*, *Billboard*, 2 February 1974, 48; “Barry White Talks About Music, Sex, Love, Marriage, Hobbies,” *Jet*, 21 June 1979, 56; Roberta Skopp, “Barry White: King of the Discos,” *Record World*, 27 December 1976, Section II, 30.

<sup>87</sup> Dennis Hunt, “Five Formulas for Successful Disco,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 November 1976; John Lombardi, “Barry White: The Billy Jack of Disco,” *Rolling Stone*, 28 August 1975, 54.

1960s soul men, ignores the ways in which White's music actually maintained much of the macho status quo and also spoke to him and other blacks as part of an upwardly-mobile population.<sup>88</sup> White's music expanded male emotional range and incorporated female pleasure, but it also contained lyrics described as "distastefully macho" and a clear "program of tunes aimed at enticing young women"—enticing, not necessarily connecting with emotionally—reflecting an atmosphere of sexual freedom for men and women, but perhaps smacking of a male sexual revolution that only saw liberated women as providing more opportunities for sex.<sup>89</sup> As it was, his music occupied a sort of liminal space, making concessions to emotional love and women's concerns and desires but failing to abandon completely a masculine-identified focus on physical satisfaction. Barry White may have crooned that his lady was "the first, the last, my everything," but he also told her, "I can't get enough of your love, babe" and "stay right there, right there/don't you move/you don't know what I'm going through/you know how to make me ooww!!"<sup>90</sup> If nothing else, Barry White's deep baritone voice singing about the pleasures of physical love could suggest little other than a virile masculinity concerned with his own proclivities. The ultimate effect was a softening of masculinity but by no means effemination or a complete break from the male music status quo.

The ways in which White talked about his music enhanced this notion of it as only a partial accommodation to the influence of feminism. White had his own

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<sup>88</sup> Alice Echols attributes the characterization of White's music as playing "the ladies game" to critic Nelson George, but she herself also presents this as the whole of White's repertoire. Echols, *Shaky Ground*, 34-35.

<sup>89</sup> Hunt, "Five Formulas"; Top Album Picks, Pop, The Love Unlimited Orchestra, *Rhapsody In White*, *Billboard*, 2 February 1974, 48.

<sup>90</sup> Lyrics and music by Barry White, T. Sepe and P.S. Radcliffe, performance by Barry White, "You're the First, the Last, My Everything," 1974; lyrics and performance by Barry White, "Can't Get Enough of Your Love, Babe," 1974; and lyrics and performance by Barry White, "What Am I Gonna Do With You," 1975, all on *Barry White's Greatest Hits* (Los Angeles: Polygram, 1975), 822 782-2.

“women’s lib rap,” as lesbian audience member Trude Heller pointed out to *Rolling Stone* writer and cultural critic John Lombardi, who then mimicked the rap for readers: ““Ah believe the war between men and women is the longest, bitterest and most destructive war in history, you dig? In a real war . . . a man needs a beautiful army. I created Love Unlimited from my own music. They were generated from a positive side, from a woman’s side’ . . . Vast applause.”<sup>91</sup> Similar ideas came up in various feature articles on the star. In his own words, White explained his thoughts to the readers of *Essence*:

Just as you’ve got to demonstrate against the war between man and man, somebody’s got to demonstrate against the war between man and woman. Ain’t nothin’ wrong with women’s liberation if it’s done in the right way. Women should be free, they should be looked upon as a woman and as a human being, but they also have a place in pleasin’ their man and their man is supposed to do the same thing for them. It’s usually the man that’s messed up. . . . the guy hurts them and they form negative attitudes.<sup>92</sup>

White saw his music as helping in the struggle to improve male-female relationships in society, to make sure women’s liberation was “done in the right way.” In White’s estimation, the “right way” involved equal effort on the part of both men and women. And while he failed to recognize that women had been held responsible for pleasing their men all along, to the detriment of their own pleasure, he did acknowledge the fact that male attitudes and behaviors needed to change in order for relations to improve. White saw his service to this “war” as teaching men how to talk to their women (or, more likely, do the talking for them).<sup>93</sup> None did it matter that, in White’s own intents, this lyrical talking was meant merely to get women in the mood for sex. It was this idea of talking,

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<sup>91</sup> Lombardi, “Billy Jack of Disco,” 54.

<sup>92</sup> Veronon Gibbs, “Entertainers: Is Barry White the New Isaac Hayes?” *Essence*, March 1974, 24. 77.

<sup>93</sup> Bob Lucas, “Big Barry White Mixes His Music for Lovers Only,” *Jet*, 22 December 1977, 32.

offering emotions to a woman rather than just a warm body, that made White seem less masculine than those soul men who came before him.

While paying lip service to women's liberation, White's ideas about gender relations tended to reinforce older notions rather than redefine either male or female roles. *Rolling Stone* quoted White as saying, "My thing, you see, is whatever you dig doing, right on! That's the freedom of America."<sup>94</sup> Yet, while White encouraged sex and sexual pleasure for men and women, he was uncomfortable in the so-called "permissive society" that movements like sexual revolution and women's liberation had spawned. He would make such comments as "women have lost a lot of dignity over the years that they used to have. They put up with it and they let men get away with it. But I feel that if a man loves a woman enough to shack up with her, then she's good enough to marry."<sup>95</sup> Such statements acted as something of a concession to feminist concerns that women might have gotten the short end of the stick in the sexual revolution, without understanding that feminism also involved the desire for women to be free from definitions of "dignity" and free to be sexually, or otherwise, involved with a man without having to marry him. It was this "old-fashioned" sense of sexual love cemented by emotional love and commitment that made Barry White's version of masculinity softer than the macho versions that had dominated popular music in the previous years. But in White's case, it came from a place of old-fashioned moral values rather than a response to feminist calls for more sensitive men (and men sympathetic to the feminist movement that called for the liberation of male emotion). The source of the emotionality

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<sup>94</sup> Lombardi, "Billy Jack of Disco," 54.

<sup>95</sup> Bob Lucas, "How Barry White Got Rich on Love," *Sepia*, June 1975, 65. Also see "Barry White Raps about His New Wife, New Life," *Jet*, 15 August 1974. While Barry espoused these ideas after his second marriage to Glodean James, one of the members of Love Unlimited, he himself participated in this "permissive society" by having lived with Glodean and her children for five years before their marriage.

notwithstanding, White's concepts of love and fidelity meant that disco offered something of an alternative to concepts of macho and male sexual privilege even if it never achieved a complete breakdown of these concepts.

Moreover, White claimed to believe in something of a mixed identity for men and that he expressed this idea through his music. In one instance, he claimed that in his music the strings were the women and the horns were the men, coming together to make love in the bed of the rhythm—guitars, bass, drums and piano—which suggests a very essentialized concept of men and women (although he did acknowledge that “there are some women who love horns” even though he didn't claim any men like strings), not to mention a clearly heterosexual sense of “love.” He used this combination of “male” and “female” instrumentation to explain why his music had such broad commercial appeal.<sup>96</sup> But in other instances, he claimed that “There are two sides to every man . . . the strong and the sensitive” and that “his music reflects the two sides of what manhood ought to be: ‘The power side—I am very domineering in business and music,’ which manifests itself in the rhythm of his music; ‘the sensitive side of me are the strings.’”<sup>97</sup> White, as a black man who grew up in the ghetto of Los Angeles, knew that black masculinity in the wake of Black Power tended toward the rough and aggressive end of the macho spectrum, and “like[d] to think of himself as tough and calloused in his approach to life, based on a very rough childhood.”<sup>98</sup> But he did not discount nor deny his sensitive side that came out in his music as anything less masculine. Revealing his upwardly mobile biases, White said, “I used to listen to black music and as much as I liked it, it had no class, no education.

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<sup>96</sup> Lucas, “Big Barry White Mixes,” 46.

<sup>97</sup> White quoted in Lucas, “Rich on Love,” *Sepia*, June 1975, 65; “Barry White Talks about Music, Sex, Love, Marriage, Hobbies,” *Jet*, 21 June 1979, 54.

<sup>98</sup> Lucas, “Rich on Love,” *Sepia*, June 1975, 65.

All it showed was a depressed nation of people.” He claimed that black people “used music as a depressed form.”<sup>99</sup> White eschewed musical labels and strove to produce music that went “beyond the usual description of ‘black music.’”<sup>100</sup> White showed, through his music, that black men could be both tough and tender, and he put forth a personal image that involved “old-fashioned” fidelity and the goal of being a good father.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, one current in disco music incorporated a model of masculinity for black men that deviated from the macho characterization of Black Power, but which did not abandon completely the long-standing notion of virile masculinity—in fact, White could be emotional because his lyrics depicted him as clearly virile in the sexual sense. Barry White’s music was on the sweeter end of the symphonic soul or sweet soul that dominated R&B in the 1970s, but he was not the only black artist who made bank off this kind of sound. Peter Shapiro has argued that, in fact, many soft soul sounds of the past had been “as androgynous and antipatriarchal (or at least apatriarchal)” as anything released on a pure disco label like Salsoul.<sup>102</sup> And Van McCoy, producer of “The Hustle,” was another disco star with an image antithetical to the black macho philosophy of Black Power: “Warm, gentle and good are excellent words to describe both the music and the essence of Van McCoy,” said *Black Stars*.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, while Barry White may have “gorged on glacé strings, and syrupy horn fanfares as if they had the sweet tooth of a thousand seven year-olds,” there are plenty of examples in the disco genre that

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<sup>99</sup> White quoted in Lucas, “Rich on Love,” 65.

<sup>100</sup> Lucas, “Rich on Love,” 65.

<sup>101</sup> In “Barry White Raps about His New Wife, New Life,” *Jet*, 15 August 1974, 24, “White says his greatest ambition is ‘to be a good father.’”

<sup>102</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 149.

<sup>103</sup> Jason Winters, “Van McCoy: Warm, Gentle and Good,” *Black Stars*, October 1977, 12.

maintained the more rough and tumble, funky bass lines of the R&B George deems “killed” by disco, which in turn maintained a masculine, rather than androgynous, sound if not outright macho lyrics.<sup>104</sup>

Beyond the Philadelphia sound, other male groups were making music that maintained the soul and funk tradition in the midst of a corporation-induced dance music craze. The Trammps, for example, whom critics often referred to as the best disco group in the country, received praise for their “good, pulsating soul,” “gritty fervor,” and for being “both high-powered and high-polished, smooth and gutsy.”<sup>105</sup> Indeed, few would consider their huge hit “Disco Inferno” to be syrupy or sweet. The Commodores, who blended pop, funk, and soul music, became visible disco icons when featured alongside Donna Summer in the disco film *Thank God It's Friday*. Their number five pop hit of the previous year, “Brick House,” also found a place on the Disco Top 40; its funky beat and rhythm combined with lyrics that objectified the female form like any of the best rock songs—“How can she lose, with the stuff she use/36-24-36, what a winning hand!”—could be construed as nothing less than macho.<sup>106</sup> In the later years of the disco boom, Chic, fronted by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, produced songs with a consistently driving rhythm, far from the syrupy sweet strings and horns of either Barry White or

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<sup>104</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 145.

<sup>105</sup> Top Singles Picks, Disco, The Trammps, “Trusting Heart,” *Billboard*, 9 November 1974, 58; Vince Aletti, “The Trammps: Disco Priests,” *Village Voice*, 14 June 1976, 107. Also see Ulish Carter, “Trammps Quality Disco Sound,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 17 July 1976; New Album Releases, Trammps, *Where The Happy People Go*,” *Soul*, 19 July 1976; Top Album Picks, Pop, The Trammps, *Disco Inferno*, *Billboard*, 15 January 1977; and “Enter the Disco Band,” *Time*, 6 September 1976, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,918312,00.html>.

<sup>106</sup> Lyrics and music by Lionel Richie et. al., performed by The Commodores, “Brick House,” on *Funk Blast! A Collection of Classic Funk* (1977, Seattle: Experience Music Project, 2000), EMPCD 002, original copyright Motown Record Company. “Brick House” was on the dance/disco charts for two weeks, and peaked at 34, but this short victory combined with the broader success of EWF negates George’s claim that gay club DJs shunned black male singers and found funk too raw and unsophisticated for disco fans who sought “pseudosophistication.” See George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 154.

Philadelphia International. Indeed, the Sugarhill Gang deemed their hit “Good Times” sufficiently “black” and “masculine” to sample its bass line in the first commercially successful rap song, “Rapper’s Delight.” Moreover, Rodgers and Edwards carefully crafted their lyrics to incorporate sly social and political commentary reminiscent of an earlier soul tradition that George feared lost.<sup>107</sup> Also late in the disco game, rock stars like the Rolling Stones and Rod Stewart had disco hits (“Miss You” and “Do Ya Think I’m Sexy”) that largely maintained rock’s boastful and arrogant status quo. Barry White’s “ladies game” music and overly-romantic focus on love and sweet orchestration was not the only option when it came to disco’s representation of masculinity and masculine sexuality, even if it did feed a trend that ultimately softened soul’s patriarchal understanding of society.

Moreover, Barry White putting forth music and an image of softer masculinity similar to that of John Travolta and the Bee Gees meant that disco represented something of a convergence of black and white masculinity. *Saturday Night Fever* may have whitened out the minority origins of disco culture, but ultimately it brought white men into discotheques dancing to the music of mostly black men and women, and Tony Manero’s anti-racist gesture near the end of the film suggested that such differences should not matter in the disco environment. Whether or not the reality matched the ideal, the movie, along with disco music’s general crossover appeal, represented disco as a space in which there was no longer a racial “other” against which white men could define themselves as masculine—in the most ideal case, they would not even need to define masculine as “unfeminine.” Barry White wrote in his autobiography that when he started

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<sup>107</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 157-173. Also see Daryl Easlea, *Everybody Dance: Chic and the Politics of Disco*, (London: Helter Skelter, 2004).



working in the music industry he welcomed cross-racial collaboration: “To me, if I couldn’t work with whites when I had the opportunity, I would consider myself only half a talent.”<sup>108</sup> Indeed, his gender identity converged with images of white masculinity of the era, and therefore appealed to the sensibilities of upwardly mobile blacks satisfied with the fact that blacks and whites could share both gender identity and musical tastes. The same forces threatened those blacks who clung to a more “authentic” definition of black music and masculinity along with whites who historically sought to define their masculinity against a black “other,” and worked to kill mainstream disco at the same time that it became the most popular musical form of a generation.<sup>109</sup>

Critics disparaged those elements of disco music that seemed to “soften” what they considered the rough and rebellious masculine tradition of both rock and R&B and criticized Barry White and the Bee Gees respectively as “soul Muzak” and “quintessential pop-disco” willing to “embrace any style in its search for commercialization.”<sup>110</sup> Yet, their sounds became the epitome of disco for the millions of Americans who bought their records, saw *Saturday Night Fever*, and danced to their songs every night. Simply writing off this new R&B sound as “inauthentic” does not do justice to its popularity and the notion that it spoke to the ideals of men and women who did not want to give up a man’s masculine identity but sought also to incorporate the ideas of liberation that still percolated in 1970s society. Moreover, many African

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<sup>108</sup> White, *Love Unlimited*, 40.

<sup>109</sup> For more on the history of a racially defined manhood see, especially, Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Also see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991) and Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

<sup>110</sup> Top Album Picks, Pop, The Love Unlimited Orchestra, *Rhapsody In White*, *Billboard*, 2 February 1974, 48; Stephen Holden, “The Evolution of a Dance Craze,” *Rolling Stone*, 19 April 1979, 30.

Americans were eager and active participants in disco culture and consumers of disco product, from its early beginnings to after its downfall—even at the height of its mass market popularity. “For many people, disco patronage approaches religion,” reported Herschel Johnson in black-oriented *Ebony* magazine’s February 1977 issue.<sup>111</sup> Many of the black disco patrons he spoke with were going every weekend, if not more often. Dancing was the major draw, and for many, disco meant socializing, exercising, and having a good time just like at a house party but in a much nicer place.<sup>112</sup>

But to this generation of black disco-goers the appeal was also about exercising their rights to go downtown and party in integrated establishments. As a dancer who went by the moniker “Love Child” explained to *Sepia* magazine, “Used to be . . . you couldn’t get into a downtown disco if you weren’t rich and white. . . . But today we can go to any disco in town.” He understood the downtown disco scene as “something new to blacks” and explained that blacks were going to take advantage of it because they were excited about being able to participate.<sup>113</sup> By the end of 1978, the year disco exploded in the mass market, blacks were still expressing their fondness for disco as an entertainment activity. “I love it. I dig the stuff out of disco,” said Bob Wilkins of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Fellow Pittsburgh resident, Miliana Boykins, reiterated that love saying, “I think that the disco is fantastic.”<sup>114</sup> Blacks not only attended discos in great numbers; they participated in the commercialization and spread of disco as an entertainment form

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<sup>111</sup> Herschel Johnson, “The Discotheque Scene,” *Ebony*, February 1977, 54.

<sup>112</sup> “‘I come out to the discotheques to dance, to meet people and because most of the clubs these days are so nice,’ said Sharon Lee, who danced at Leviticus one evening recently. ‘It’s much nicer than meeting friends in a bar or cocktail lounge; it’s like going to a big house party.’” See Shawn G. Kennedy, “The New Discotheque Scene: ‘Like Going to a Big House Party,’” *New York Times*, 3 January 1976.

<sup>113</sup> “Love Child” quoted in Mark Ribowsky, “The Big Disco Dancing Boom,” *Sepia*, March 1976, 68 and 70. Ralph Lee, the manager of New York’s Hippopotamus, which had a large black clientele, explained it simply: “Black people are accepting the fact that they’re accepted.” Also quoted in Ribowsky, 70.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Flipping, Jr., “‘Disco Fever’: Are Whites Capitalizing on Black Lifestyles?” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 28 October 1978.

through club proprietorship and one-night disco promotions.<sup>115</sup> The NAACP even hosted disco events to raise money and recruit membership.<sup>116</sup> Blacks would always have a unique relationship to disco as a culture because of their community's history with dance as a social function, but the redistribution of house parties to discotheques, the commercialization of the disco scene, and the mixing of whites and blacks did not diminish their active participation and enjoyment.

African Americans' love of disco necessarily involved consumption of the crossover hits that had earned the critique of black music industry personnel. Black dancers claimed that they preferred bumping, freaking and freestyle to "discoing," and owners and promoters felt that, compared the mid-range disco of most white clubs, black discos played a funkier R&B sound to accommodate those steps.<sup>117</sup> Yet, the racial integration in many discotheques and the purchasing patterns of black youths suggest that black disco fans were not averse to engaging with commercial, pop disco and that even the most commercial of disco crossover music had a strong contingent of black fans. In 1978, *Billboard* reported that "blacks make up a large percentage of regular disco patrons throughout the country and most all major clubs sport a well integrated clientele."<sup>118</sup> Such integration meant discos offered a mixture of both funky R&B and "regular" disco,

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<sup>115</sup> Robert Ford Jr., "Black Patrons Significant In Club Activities," *Billboard*, 24 June 1978, 59, 71.

<sup>116</sup> "NAACP Annual Charity Ball Slated May 25," *Atlanta Daily World*, 20 May 1979 and "Freedom Disco Planned," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 24 February 1977. Other black organizations used disco as a drawing point and as a rallying point for political campaigns. See "Brooklyn Disco with a Unique Purpose," *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 November 1977; "Singles Plan Disco Party," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 14 September 1978; Audrey Barnard, "Voter Education Group Sponsors Disco Fever," *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 March 1977 and "Sutton Fans Jam Leviticus," *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 April 1977.

<sup>117</sup> Flipping, "Whites Capitalizing on Black Lifestyles?"; Eliot Sekuler, Dialogue, "Marc Paul Simon on Disco Promotion," *Record World*, 6 September 1975, 18; Ford, "Black Patrons Significant," 71. The interviewees in the Flipping article use the term "discoing" to describe patterned dances, most likely variations on the Hustle.

<sup>118</sup> Ford, "Black Patrons Significant," 59.

as described by the owner of the well-integrated Fox Hunt Club in Atlanta, which meant black dancers boogied to both—perhaps some danced to “regular” disco exclusively.<sup>119</sup>

It was abundantly clear that black disco fans bought commercial disco records. “All of the black people in America had the Bee Gees record. *Everybody* buys Chic records, everybody buys Donna Summer,” said Chic frontman Nile Rodgers.<sup>120</sup> Whether everybody bought those records, their popularity was enough for Rodgers to believe it so, and certainly, the records could not have sold millions without the contributions of African Americans. Even more telling was the acknowledgement by retailers and radio programmers that “blacks will buy white music from white retailers because black retailers won’t carry it,” as Tom Ray of Tar Productions reminded the Black Music Association.<sup>121</sup> Soul radio stations had already started moving away from their Black Power line of exclusively black acts and programming white acts to maintain their young black listenership.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, black discoters were open to crossover because they did not want their music to preach to them. As “Love Child” put it, “When we go out we want to get down and have some fun . . . We don’t want to read anything into our music.”<sup>123</sup> As much as some blacks held serious trepidation that disco music was deteriorating the “authentic” expressions of the black community, other black disco fans praised it as much more than nameless, faceless music “mindlessly being cranked out.”

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 71. Alice Echols makes a similar claim to disco’s popularity among black audiences. See Echols, “Land of Somewhere Else,” 23.

<sup>120</sup> Rodgers quoted in Geoff Brown, “Qui sont ces gens? C’est Chic,” *Black Music and Jazz Review*, March 1979, 27.

<sup>121</sup> “No Agreement at BMA Meet on Disco Music’s Pros & Cons,” *Variety*, 13 June 1979, 73.

<sup>122</sup> Paul Grein, “Black Radio: Racial Lines Fadeout?” *Billboard*, 30 October 1976, 3, 18.

<sup>123</sup> Ribowsky, “Big Disco Dancing Boom,” 66. According to Kwame Brathwaite and Chris Policano “Clap your hands! Stomp your feet! Be happy!” was “the main message behind all disco music, and it works.” See “A Look at the Disco Craze, Pt. 1,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 February 1976.

To them it was “a heartbeat” that acted as “a great integrator.”<sup>124</sup> The late 1970s generation of partying young blacks were thoroughly assimilated into larger American popular culture, excited to disintegrate the lines culturally separating white from black. Their enthusiastic participation and consumption of disco music and culture—even at its most commercial—mirrored the disintegration of the Black Power movement as a force in their lives and society.

Historian Brian Ward has explained this black engagement with disco as either an experiment in pushing the boundaries of economic advance and “raceless” opportunity for upwardly mobile, middle-class blacks or a temporary escape from the ghetto for poor, inner-city residents. While I appreciate his analysis of class and escape as central components of disco’s popularity among blacks, it does not adequately address the gender situation of the time. Indeed, disco as “a great integrator” was a central defense of disco in the black or trade press, and for blacks, who had been dancing all along, the new discotheques and disco sound continued to be about partying, celebration, and release. They went to release the tensions of tedious jobs and bad breaks, especially in the hard economic times of the 1970s. As Rochelle Adams of New York bluntly stated, “I go to escape . . . I go to escape my job, and my bills, and everything else.”<sup>125</sup> Ward’s explanation is not unfounded. Yet, it becomes further complicated when considered within the gendered historical context of the era—when we take into consideration how the growth of black feminism challenged black power masculinity and new constructions of the black masculine ideal intermingled with lingering black macho sentiments.

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<sup>124</sup> Gregory Charles and Editor response, Reaction, “A Special Place for Disco,” *Soul*, June 1980, 39.

<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Johnson, “Discotheque Scene,” 54.

I would argue that the way disco music moved away from the preceding musical era's masculinist R&B was a major aspect of what made disco music (and its status as crossover music) popular with its black fans because of the way it paralleled larger developments in constructions of black masculinity. In the 1970s, black men were preoccupied with being "real men," but the collision of Black Power with other movements—gay and women's liberation, the human potential movement—meant that this definition was up for debate. In addition to the tough masculine ideal of Black Power, the 1970s would see the emergence of a more emotional, gentle, and family-oriented masculine ideal among black men that developed, in part, out of feminist critiques by black women. While most black women had a hard time relating to what many perceived as second wave feminism's anti-male rhetoric and its ideas of universal womanhood and did not want to abandon their men or further bruise the already fragile ego of many a black male fighting for recognition as a "real man," other black women took up the rhetoric of feminism and sexual revolution to address the shortcomings—sexual or otherwise—of their male partners. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a wave of writing and organizing on the part of black women redefined feminism to address their dual oppression as both black and female and address the unequal gender roles dictated by the black man's quest for masculine recognition within dominant society.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 18, 68-69; Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 4. For more on black feminist critiques of Black Power see Rhonda Y. Williams, "Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power"; Kimberly Springer, "Black Feminists Respond to Black Power Masculinism" and Stephen Ward, "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics," all in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006). Also see E. Frances White, "Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism," *Journal of Women's History* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 73-97. I expand on black feminism, especially in relation to sexuality and sexual revolution, in the next chapter.

Moreover, various articles in the popular black press of the 1970s faulted black men for their selfish, conquest-oriented approach to sexuality that rushed lovemaking and held little regard for female pleasure or emotions.<sup>127</sup> The sexual revolution gave some black women the strength to talk about their own sexual concerns with their men by highlighting women's right to sexual pleasure and autonomy beyond being the object of sexual conquest and procreation for black men. "The sexual revolution has created an atmosphere in which some Black women are refusing to be used or abused," said medical professionals and frequent contributors to *Ebony's* articles on sexual health, Richard and Joanne Tyson.<sup>128</sup> Black women's demands for sexual equality that required an emotional commitment caused strains and confusion in black gender relations, but the demands also helped redefine ideal masculinity within their community.

While a minority figure in representations, this new black manhood "emphasized respect for women along with protection and provisions for families," argues gender studies scholar, Judith Newton.<sup>129</sup> It attempted to address the concerns of women and critiqued the self-advancing, unemotional masculine ideals of "traditional" white society and Black Power, thus opening up a space where black men could be nurturing and emotional to others. Concerns over the "feminization of black men" and reports that many black men viewed aggressive women as "a threat to the traditional masculine role"

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<sup>127</sup> Carol A. Morton, "Mistakes Black Men Make in Relating to Black Women," *Ebony*, December 1975; Louis C. Young, Jr., "Are Black Men Taking Care of Business?" *Essence*, April 1974; Barbara Sharon Lundy, Letters to the Editor, "The 'Pretty Black Man,'" *Ebony*, November 1974; Tyson and Tyson, "Sex and the Black Woman," 106.

<sup>128</sup> Tyson and Tyson, "Sex and the Black Woman," 108. Similar sentiments expressed in the following articles: Morton, "Mistakes Black Men Make"; Bonnie Allen, "Essence and Other Thoughts on the 70's," *Essence*, May 1980; Phyllis Hudson, "Black Women Talk about Their Sexuality," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 17 December 1977.

<sup>129</sup> Judith Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men's Movement* (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 72.

were common in the mid-1970s and continued into the early 1980s.<sup>130</sup> But mixed in among the complaints were declarations that “there are some Black men who are deeply concerned,” that “some [black men] were equally as conservative as the women” in terms of sexual activity, and that black men who resisted women’s independence were “still caught up in the ways of the past.”<sup>131</sup> While Newton argues that this new ideal of black manhood continued to practice conservative gender roles and was not about gender equality, Doris Murray of Chicago described this “beautiful Black male” as “an ethical agent” who “does not find it demeaning to show love and affection to his family, shares the terrain of decision-making, and doesn’t feel any less of a man having done so. He understands those things that make a woman happy and doesn’t mind when the male-female egos conflict.” Ultimately, said Murray, the beautiful black male “asserts his manliness in such a manner that does not include making the Black woman subservient.”<sup>132</sup> This masculine ideal had such an influence on black gender roles and sexual practices that by the early 1980s, the black popular press frequently reported that most black men were happy sharing roles, bills, and decision making with women; were “converging their sexual values with those of women, viewing it as an all-encompassing set of feelings and reactions that make up the total person”; and were showing concern for the sexual needs of their women as well as exploring variety in sexual practices.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> “nothing can more quickly and decisively lead to the destruction of our people than the evolution of a breed of men who are dubious symbols to black boys,” said Robert T. Bowen, Letters to the Editor, “Should Men Wear Jewelry?” *Ebony*, December 1976, 19-20. Also see Letters to the Editor, “The ‘Pretty Black Man,’” *Ebony*, November 1974; Victoria Davis, Write On!, “Black Men TCB?/Guide,” *Essence*, June 1974; “Many Black Men Still Fear Sexually Aggressive Women,” *Jet*, 28 August 1981; and Martin Simmons, “Relationships in the Eighties: Going Through Changes,” *Essence*, September 1982.

<sup>131</sup> Victoria Davis, Write On!, “Black Men TCB?/Guide,” 5; Staples, “New Sex vs. the Old Ideals,” 83.  
<sup>132</sup> Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers*, 71-74; Doris Murray, Letters to the Editor, “The Ways Black Men Pimp,” *Ebony*, January 1978, 15, 17.

<sup>133</sup> Llyod Gite, “How Have Women’s Changing Roles Changed You?” *Essence*, November 1982, 76-77; Staples, “New Sex vs. the Old Ideals,” 116; Staples, “Black Male Sexuality,” 110.



The new, emotional masculine ideal and the ways it contrasted with the more commanding Black Power ideal among black men paralleled the ways in which white men debated their proper role in the new gender and sexual order—the ways in which emotional and profeminist men became a new masculine ideal even as other men resisted change. Along the same lines, the cultural integration and “raceless” access to sophistication and pleasure that excited blacks about disco also meant a convergence of gender roles. Alice Echols has argued that disco helped hasten the demise of “blackness” and black masculinity as sources of white fascination because of the way it presented something of a tamed masculinity.<sup>134</sup> This lack of fascinating fodder contributed to the movement of hip whites to other forms of music in search of marginality, but considering disco’s popularity with both blacks and whites, it also represented a convergence of black and white gender definitions. As an expression of upwardly mobile gender ideals in the black community, disco represented a contingent of men who adhered to a new definition of masculinity that attempted to incorporate gentle aspects without abandoning their active and aggressive sexual selves. As escape, disco allowed lower class black youths to imagine a masculinity that was not the violent and virile warrior masculinity of their peer group, but which allowed them to present themselves—through the sweeping strings or lyrics of someone like Barry White—as caring men sensitive to the complaints and concerns of their black sisters.

### **KC and the Sunshine Band: The Ultimate Blend**

KC and the Sunshine Band contributed to the convergence (or confusion) of black and white masculinities in a way that complimented that of Barry White and was the

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<sup>134</sup> Echols, ““Shaky Ground,”” 187-188.

epitome of disco as a cultural expression of the general decategorization of race, gender, and music in the 1970s. If White's music was not black enough and originally had at least a few people shocked to learn the producer was black, Harry Wayne Casey and his Sunshine Band made even more of a stir on the disco scene. H. W. Casey grew up in south Florida, just outside of Miami, playing piano in church, singing in local bands, and studying music at Miami-Dade Community College. In the early 1970s, he took on odd jobs at local T.K. Records so he could be involved in the music business, eventually leading to his own record contract with the label and production work on various songs, including the label's hit "Rock Your Baby" by George McCrea. In 1973, Casey created KC and the Sunshine Junkanoo Band, the name reflecting the Caribbean influence in their "Hialeah Sound." In 1974, Richard Finch joined the band, renamed KC and the Sunshine Band, and they released their first full-length album, *Do It Good*. Casey and Finch became the white leaders of an otherwise all-black funk band: they wrote, produced, performed and arranged the music (Casey sang lead and played keyboards; Finch played bass) that yielded numerous soul and crossover hits and garnered praise from both blacks and whites.<sup>135</sup>

Even after they started touring in 1975, and their many black fans came to know that "[Casey] was a 'honkey from Crackerland,'" their popularity continued.<sup>136</sup> Casey was a "new breed of white Southerner who shrug[ged] off nonchalantly any racial implications to the dream success story of his group" and his fellow black band members

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<sup>135</sup> For more information on H.W. Casey and the history of KC and the Sunshine Band see Craig MacInnis, *That's the Way I Like It: The Harry Wayne Casey Story* (Ontario, Canada: Team Power Publishing, 2002) and *KC and the Sunshine Band: The Official Website*, <http://www.heykcsb.com>.

<sup>136</sup> Patrick Salvo, "Black Funk with a White Twist," *Sepia*, June 1976, 74.

echoed his sentiments that it did not mean anything to most people.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, KC and the Sunshine Band played before audiences that were mostly black, mostly white, or mixed, and black fans of the Sunshine Band vocally defended their music as “a good brand of soul music,” one of them saying “that White fellow can cook with the best of them.”<sup>138</sup> There were the detractors who argued that whites claiming hits with soul music were “just imitators” or that KC and the Sunshine Band was producing a predictable commercial form of disco, not R&B, but the devoted fans far outnumbered these detractors.<sup>139</sup> KC and the Sunshine Band were successful in their own right. Their “Hiialeah Sound” mix of funk, rock, and Latin rhythms became a fixture in the discomania that took over American nightlife in the mid-1970s, and KC and the Sunshine Band, combined with the dance hits of white R&B groups like Wild Cherry and Average White Band, brought whites and blacks together in a disco market open to the possibilities of integrating music as well as people.

What this means in terms of masculinity is more uncertain, and perhaps even more significant because of that lack of clarity. KC and the Sunshine Band’s music was not the lush, romantic sound of Barry White’s disco; rather it was a unique, Miami-based sound that mixed aspects of funk, soulful R&B, Caribbean and Latin influences with

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 74; Dennis Hunt, “Ray of Sunshine Lights KC’s Life,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 November 1975. Also see Steve Ivory, “K.C. & Sunshine Band Not Ready,” *Soul*, 24 November 1975; John Rockwell, The Pop Life, *New York Times*, 1 October 1976; Jason Winters, “K.C. and The Sunshine Band: ‘Making Musical Rainbows’,” *Black Stars*, August 1977, 68. The band members acknowledged a few incidents of racial slurs and heckling from both blacks and whites at concerts, but did not attribute them any real significance.

<sup>138</sup> Donna Caldwell, “Reactions: Another Side,” *Soul*, 22 December 1975, 19.

<sup>139</sup> For detractors see Susan Champlin, Mail, “K.C. and the Sunshine Band,” *People*, 15 August 1977; and Ann Lewis, Letters, “Funkless Honkies,” *Soul*, 11 April 1977. For fans’ praise see: H.W. Casey, Black Stars Letters, “K.C. And The Sunshine Band,” *Black Stars*, November 1977; Robin Marks, Black Stars Letters, “K.C. And The Sunshine Band,” *Black Stars*, November 1977; Ginger Monroe, Mail, “K.C. and the Sunshine Band,” *People*, 15 August 1977; and Rochelle Kirkwood, Reaction, “Get down KC,” *Soul*, 15 March 1976.

some parts of traditional rock ‘n’ roll. Unlike Barry White’s music, which blended female strings with male horns, KC and the Sunshine Band put horns and rhythm (in the form of guitar and drums) up front.<sup>140</sup> Casey once commented that his music was not disco: “‘Disco?’ he sniffs. ‘That’s like Broadway musicals, man. Strings, commercial—we do R&B.’”<sup>141</sup> Yet, KC and the Sunshine Band sold just as well on the influence of discotheque (rather than radio) play as Barry White—they were equally commercial. KC and the Sunshine Band combined a masculine instrumentation with music titles and lyrics that suggested sex more often than anything else. There were songs like “Baby I Love You (Yes I Do)” that talked about monogamous emotional love with the excitement of physical love and others that just focused on the joy of dancing like “(Shake, Shake, Shake) Shake Your Booty.” But the majority of their songs had much more suggestive lyrics that featured Casey singing lines like “When you give me all your love and do it/Babe, the very best you can/Oh, that’s the way I like it”<sup>142</sup> Yet, to observers, Harry Wayne Casey never exuded the same kind of sexual energy as Barry White.

Instead of music that soothed and excited like that of Barry White or message music with political valence and a dark sound, KC and the Sunshine Band produced happy music that was appealingly commercial with little pretense of political message.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> See descriptions in “Spotlight: Records,” *Seventeen*, August 1976; Top Single Picks, Pop, KC and the Sunshine Band, “Let’s Go Rock and Roll,” *Billboard*, 2 February 1980; Top Album Picks, Soul, KC and the Sunshine Band, *Billboard*, 19 July 1975; Top Single Picks, Pop, KC and the Sunshine Band, “I’m Your Boogie Man,” *Billboard*, 26 February 1977; and Georgia Christgau, “KC Is a Pushover, Baby,” *Village Voice*, 8 August 1977.

<sup>141</sup> Jim Jerome, “KC Is the Disco Boogie,” *People*, 25 July 1977, 70.

<sup>142</sup> Lyrics by H.W. Casey and Richard Finch, performed by KC and the Sunshine Band, “That’s the Way I Like It,” on *Disco Hits, Vol. 1*, compact disc (1975, Los Angeles: Rhino Records, 1992), R2 71094.

<sup>143</sup> “On the whole, KC is unconcerned with the charges that his music lacks a message. Says he, ‘There’s a message there. It may not be a book, but it’s a page! At this point there’s a little bit of a love message between human beings in my songs. If I can get my message out there, it will be great, but I don’t think people want to hear my message yet.’” See Leonard Pitts, Jr., “KC and the Sunshine Band,” *Soul*, 3 January 1977, 12.

Reviews described the music as having a “gleeful energy,” its sound as “warm, optimistic,” and “remarkably inviting.”<sup>144</sup> Moreover, the few times press articles dealt with the sexual aspects of Casey’s sound, the writers described it as having a “light, slightly sensual charm,” and his lyrics as being “happy, couched as they are in such mindlessly ambiguous teen language as ‘I Like To Do It.’”<sup>145</sup> According to the latter writer, Georgia Christgau who was a former staff writer at the rock and roll magazine *Creem*, Harry Wayne Casey’s inherent awkwardness further tempered any macho threats to the livelihoods of adolescent girls. After attending a KC and the Sunshine Band concert, she commented, “when I witnessed neatly pressed white girls wriggling in the aisles because their idol allowed them to think about sex for an hour, I was glad to notice that Harry Casey is something of a square himself. At least it was less oppressive than watching a macho rock idol like Paul Rodgers expect adoration just because he showed up for a gig.”<sup>146</sup> Because Casey came off as a square and his lyrics were less explicit than male rockers of the time, the idea of young girls watching KC and the Sunshine Band was “less oppressive” than them being exposed to the macho arrogance and self-indulgent sexuality of a rocker like Paul Rodgers who found international success in the 1970s with bands like Free and Bad Company that epitomized cock rock masculinity.

It is not entirely clear if Christgau, a feminist of an earlier generation, enjoyed KC and the Sunshine Band as a musical group, but she does explain and support the sexual release that his concerts allowed his young female fans: “Casey’s lyrics promise sex in

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<sup>144</sup> Spotlight: Records,” *Seventeen*, August 1976, 150; Tom Vickers, “Disco Stars”, 42; Robert Hilburn, “KC, Summer: Cheers at the Top,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 September 1977.

<sup>145</sup> Hilburn, “Cheers at the Top”; Christgau, “KC Is a Pushover, Baby,” 49.

<sup>146</sup> Christgau, “KC Is a Pushover, Baby,” 49.

the present tense, which is important to girls who are going to wait years and years.”<sup>147</sup> Christgau believed that it was important for these girls to get in touch with their sexuality even at a young age and that KC and the Sunshine Band helped them do so in a way that was more accessible (acceptable?) than most male rockers: “Paul Rodgers’s explicitness, that well-honed horniness common among bored, fabulous rock stars, shuts out sweet teenage girls who might just be sharp enough to see that fabulous guy is singing about himself, not about them.”<sup>148</sup> Not that KC and the Sunshine Band was necessarily singing about them either, as evidenced in lyrics as simple as “That’s the way I like it” or “Don’t build me up just to let me down/Don’t stop it now/Don’t turn me on just to turn me off/Don’t stop it now/Keep it comin’ love.”<sup>149</sup> But, as far as Christgau was concerned, the ambiguity of the message combined with the awkwardness of a white lead singer doing “black” music made Casey’s disco music “safer” for young women to fantasize to than the more abrasively macho stuff of rock. The “female voices [that] provide a sexy counterpoint to KC’s lead vocals” probably helped in this appeal.<sup>150</sup> KC and the Sunshine Band was a male disco group that made music celebrating sex in a way that even a feminist could get on board with.

Christgau’s characterization of Casey as square reinforced his image in the press as something of a “good boy.” Journalists were quick to point out that he had a religious

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 49. Christgau makes her radical feminist inclinations known in saying, “the trappings of adolescent freedom reek of conservatism today, just as they did 10 years ago. When you dress up to go out, you wear a bra to show that you need to, and the idea of going braless as a political statement seems as far away as most others.”

<sup>148</sup> Christgau, “KC Is a Pushover, Baby,” 49

<sup>149</sup> Lyrics by Casey and Finch, performed by KC and the Sunshine Band, “That’s the Way I Like It,” on *Disco Hits, Vol. 1*; Lyrics by Casey and Finch, performed by KC & the Sunshine Band, “Keep It Comin’ Love,” on *Disco Hits, Vol. 5*, compact disc (1977, Los Angeles: Rhino Records, 1994), R2 71668. Original copyright, T.K. Records.

<sup>150</sup> Top Album Picks, Pop, KC & the Sunshine Band, *Who Do Ya (Love)*, *Billboard*, 12 August 1978, 80.

background, also noting that he had stopped smoking and was a vegetarian.<sup>151</sup> In terms of relationships, Casey was playing the field. That “the field he’s playing, KC confides, is the ‘more-or-less-whatever-comes-backstage-or-through-the-lobby’ ballpark,” did not cause any major stir among *People* readers was probably because he couched it in terms of respect: “‘I could make lasting commitments, but I’d rather retain my freedom. I don’t want to cause any heartbreak.’” He also noted that he stayed away from his underage groupies.<sup>152</sup> One reader of *Black Stars* wrote in to comment how much he adored “K.C. . . not only as a singer, but from the way he lives” because “from what I read in your magazine he seems to live a very quiet life.”<sup>153</sup> Perhaps *Record World* put it best in saying, “[Casey] makes wholesomeness sexy.”<sup>154</sup> That a photograph in *Record World* showed him signing an autograph for a black woman and *Billboard* reported him having caused “a small-scale riot among the local adolescent females” during a concert in affluent Tarrytown, New York, suggests that a generation of black and white women alike loved the type of square and soft masculinity that his image and music projected.<sup>155</sup> Male disco stars did not need to epitomize sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll in order to gain fame; nor did they need to espouse the virile, patriarchal masculinity of the male soul singer. In fact, that they more often than not personified a softer version of the macho

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<sup>151</sup> See, for example, Winters, “Making Musical Rainbows.”

<sup>152</sup> Jerome, “KC is the Disco Boogie,” 72.

<sup>153</sup> H.W. Casey, Black Stars Letters, “K.C. and the Sunshine Band,” *Black Stars*, November 1977, 4. I speculate that considering the use of third person this letter was written by another H.W. Casey, not that of The Sunshine Band.

<sup>154</sup> “Harry Wayne Casey: The Joy of Entertainment,” *Record World*, 10 December 1977, section II, 6. Michale Lloyd (Record Producer) would reiterate this idea in H.W. Casey’s biography: “His Music was intimate, sexy and exciting and yet somehow innocent. It sounded good then and it sounds good now.” See MacInnis, *That’s the Way I Like It*, inside cover.

<sup>155</sup> “Harry Wayne Casey: The Joy of Entertainment,” 32; Robert Ford Jr., Talent In Action, KC and the Sunshine Band, Brass Construction, Westchester Premier Theater, Tarrytown, NY, *Billboard*, 18 September 1976, 28.

rocker or soul singer helps explain their success in a society still coming to terms with the demands of feminism.

## **Conclusion**

That disco was all together expansive enough to retain a sense of macho bravado while reacting against Black Power masculinity and capitulating to feminist demands meant it opened a space for blacks as well as whites to work through their confusions about gender relations in this time of change. Both black and white disco men engaged in the blurring of gender lines through their style, music, and persona, making disco a challenge to racial divisions and separations that black and white cultural leaders had drawn up in music and culture in the previous Black Power era and helping to explain its simultaneous popularity and backlash. In a time when Black Power was losing strength, largely under the critiques of a rising black feminist movement, the new R&B music and masculinity of disco was a cultural representation of a step away from Black Power masculinity to accommodate the demands of women and a celebration of the gains of the black freedom struggle. Disco was upbeat, happy music with lyrics that seemed far removed from the darkly orchestrated political message songs of the late 1960s and early 1970s. By presenting a masculinity that maintained an expression of the strong, virile male but at the same time projected an air of vulnerability and tenderness that seemed to contradict the warrior ideal of Black Power, disco offered a new sense of masculine representation to the black soul singer, whose music had previously been dominated by angry, misogynist and patriarchal messages. Moreover, the black male disco icon projected a masculinity that was essentially the same as the white masculinity Black Power had criticized. What disco writer Vince Aletti once called Barry White's



“effective mixes of the tender and the tough” were paralleled by John Travolta’s tough-yet-tender persona as he mixed traditionally masculine- and feminine-defined character traits in the same way that Barry White’s music mixed male horns with female strings.<sup>156</sup> This unique mix was indicative of disco’s general nod to a colorblind music genre, along with gender and sexual inclusivity, and was both intriguing to some and upsetting to others.

As the backlash against disco ate into its dominance of the music charts at the beginning of the 1980s, rap built on disco’s backbeats and breaks to develop into the newest sound in black music. Critics like George deemed the return to misogynist, tough masculinity represented in a musical form that was rougher and outspokenly political as more authentically “black” than the smooth orchestrations of disco, which shows just how troubling disco’s redefinition of masculinity was for those black men who understood their masculinity in those terms.<sup>157</sup> But it was more than disco’s reflection of masculine crisis that caused the most concern among blacks and men. Disco’s representations of masculinity were troublesome, but they represented a newly emerging masculine model of the time and were not so far removed from “traditional” masculinity and patriarchy to warrant such a strongly negative response. What was even more troubling in the eyes of black and white men coming to terms with the changes of sexual revolution and liberation movements were the ways in which disco gave a new, confident voice to the sexual desires of women—and a prevailing voice, at that, in a music industry historically dominated by men.

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<sup>156</sup> Vince Aletti, Review of Barry White, *Can’t Get Enough*, *Rolling Stone*, 24 October 1974, 76.

<sup>157</sup> For more on rap and its relation to black music and masculinity see Nelson George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 189-194; Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music & Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); and Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That’s the Joint! The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

## Chapter 5

### **Pop Culture Feminists: Disco Divas Negotiate Feminism and Sexual Liberation**

In 1974, Gloria Gaynor released an energized remake of the Jackson 5 soul classic “Never Can Say Goodbye” that included lush vocals, strings, and a “thoroughly funky rhythm section.”<sup>1</sup> In October of that year, the single became the first song to top *Billboard*’s new weekly “Disco Action” chart, and by January, it reached number nine on *Billboard*’s Top 100. To honor her contribution to disco music, the National Association of Discotheque Disc Jockeys crowned Gaynor “Queen of the Discos” on 3 March 1975, and her success charted a central place for female performers in mainstream disco from its very beginning. Gaynor had a few other respectable dance hits in the next few years, but mostly fell off the disco scene after 1976. She returned triumphantly late in 1978, with her massive hit “I Will Survive” and reclaimed her title as a disco queen. In the meantime, disco had exploded into a phenomenon and innumerable disco divas of all shapes, colors, sizes, and abilities etched their place in American cultural history.

Over the course of those few years, disco also gained the nickname “sex rock” and a reputation as a decadent entertainment form where divas and dancers let go of inhibitions while expressing desire and ecstasy. Critics, then and now, amplified this reputation for the disco diva by interpreting disco as “ultimately a producer’s music, which means men’s music, which means the exploitation of women to suit male

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<sup>1</sup> New On the Charts, Gloria Gaynor, “Never Can Say Goodbye,” *Billboard*, 9 November 1974, 16.

fantasies.”<sup>2</sup> In this interpretation, “the image they [women disco singers] project for other people is not a very noble or complex one. At best, it’s just mindless and silly. At worst, it’s a puppet-like acting-out of a male fantasy of women as objects or as slightly grotesque figures of exaggerated lust and dominance.”<sup>3</sup> There is no denying that disco was a cultural form that profited from its sexy reputation, but to reduce it to only a producer’s medium in which men produced women to meet the expectations and fantasies of other men oversimplifies the complexities of female sexuality expressed in disco and takes away the agency these women had in making their voices heard in a medium that had up to that point largely ignored them, objectified them, or expected them to be “respectable” and innocent.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, there were those women who capitulated to the objectification of their bodies in order to find a spot in the disco world as well as producers who exploited the culture’s sexy reputation to find success, but not all disco divas played to the genre’s exploitation of the newly sexualized commercial culture of the 1970s. There were those divas who made every attempt to avoid the

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<sup>2</sup> John Rockwell, “Why Are the New Stars of Disco Mostly Women?” *New York Times*, 4 March 1979. Also see Eve Zibart’s “Sex and the Singles Girls: Top Five Spots for Red-Light Rock,” *Washington Post*, 6 July 1979. Judy Kutulas makes a similar argument in her essay “‘You Probably Think This Song is About You’: 1970s Women’s Music from Carole King to the Disco Divas,” in *Disco Divas: Women’s Popular Culture in the 1970s*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), in which she portrays the producer as a musical pimp and places Donna Summer (and other disco divas) in the category of “musical slut” (188).

<sup>3</sup> Rockwell, “Mostly Women.”

<sup>4</sup> In the agency and subjectivity put forth, disco allowed for an expression of female sexuality reminiscent of 1920s blues women, but did so for a mainstream audience whereas the blues, marketed under the designation “race records,” were bought and heard almost exclusively by African Americans, as Hazel Carby has noted. Like these blues women, however, disco divas found empowerment in the sexual explicitness of their medium even if others interpreted it as disempowering objectification. For work on sexuality in the music of 1920s blues women see, Marybeth Hamilton, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and the Making of the Blues Tradition,” *Past and Present*, No. 169 (November 2000): 132-160; Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Hazel V. Carby, “‘It Jus’ Be’s Dat Way Sometime’: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues” in *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-Cultural Reader in U.S. Women’s History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: Routledge, 1994), 330-341 and Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988). Robert Allen makes a similar argument about performers’ empowerment through sexual spectacle in *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

branding of sex symbol and those who did not engage in the debate at all. Ultimately, disco's diversity of sexual expression made it special, giving women a space to engage in a journey of sexual self-discovery with a spectrum of options from which to choose.

Moreover, the influence of both sexual revolution and feminism in larger society helped pave the way for disco's openness to sexual expression and variety for women, and we must take the time to understand this expression in relation to those movements.<sup>5</sup> Disco reached its peak at a time when the feminist movement was becoming progressively more fragmented and individualistic, and feminist ideas influenced more women in large part because these ideas increasingly came through popular culture. Disco divas played a part in the mainstreaming of feminism by representing and singing of independent and sexually empowered women—focusing on sexual agency and freedom because of how disco as a culture did the same. Perhaps participating in the conflation of women's liberation and sexual liberation, these women, more importantly, continued to make female sexual pleasure a central aspect of women's liberation at a time when many feminists highlighted only sexual danger. As a group made up of mostly African American women, disco divas also spoke to a black feminist consciousness that built on the ideas of a largely white and middle-class feminist movement but understood itself as distinct and removed from that movement because of the unique experience of black female subjectivities shaped by sexism and racism simultaneously.<sup>6</sup> The black feminisms I explore here were feminisms, mediated through popular culture, which

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Glenn took on a similar project in relation to theatre women and new concepts of womanhood at the turn of the twentieth century. See Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Foundational in this concept of dual oppression was Frances M. Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, (1979, New York: The New Press, 1995), 146-156.

incorporated concepts of human potential, women's liberation, and sexual revolution in ways that also navigated histories of racial stereotyping, respectability, and civil rights. And different divas represented these feminisms in different ways—some took the idea of sex as a realm of self-expression, pleasure, and play to its extremes while others kept sexual expression within more traditional boundaries of love and heterosexuality, reclaiming respectability inside a medium that challenged its very definition.

I use this chapter to explore the complicated relationship disco had with feminism and female sexuality, looking at how disco gave a voice to women, especially African-American women, to express their sexuality in different ways, working within the confusions of the time. My opening discussion explores debates over a music industry increasingly defined by the commercialization of sex and the specific relation of black women to this sexually expressive culture. I then go on to illustrate the various kinds of female sexual expression encompassed within disco with three case studies. Labelle and Grace Jones used their music and sexual personas to challenge standard ideas of women as sexually submissive and passive, representing an active and expressive sexuality for women that also pushed, sometimes broke, the boundaries of heterosexual and feminine performance. Sister Sledge chose a different route and became famous for their more traditionally feminine personas that emphasized the respectability of the black family and an air of innocence and love in terms of female sexuality. I end the chapter with a short discussion of how disco divas negotiated the tricky terrain of espousing feminist ideals while trying to make a living in a society growing increasingly frustrated with the movement. Sexual freedom for women cannot be separated from the gains of the feminist movement, and disco divas serve as a strong example of how, by the end of the

1970s, feminism had become more than a movement—it constituted an element of women’s everyday lives, taken advantage of and called upon when needed, but as readily denied and denounced when inconvenient. As these disco divas reveal, women did not need to claim a feminist consciousness to reflect feminist ideals. Indeed, the strengthening backlash against feminism at the end of the 1970s meant that many women distanced themselves from the movement while still adapting its concepts to their lives.

### **Sexual Expression, Music and Black Women**

The popular music industry of the 1970s provides insight into how people reacted to the increasingly public nature of sex in their society, the result of a sexual revolution that had greatly accelerated the commercialization of sex. As the larger culture industry produced ever-more explicit sexual references and stimulating imagery as part of the opening up of American society, popular music was no exception. “Much of today’s upbeat music from pulsating disco, to penetrating rock right down to those lowdown dirty blues has turned naughty enough to create a sort of ‘sex-sense’ to nature’s starting five,” remarked *Jet* magazine in 1976.<sup>7</sup> Coming immediately after the musical emphasis on social protest of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the popular music of the mid- to late-1970s returned to an emphasis on romance and love, but love in which sex was central and far from the innocent or ambiguous references of a previous generation of musical love. As the editor of *Soul*, Judy Spiegelman, commented, in the 1970s, “it would seem that sex is experienced prior to love and the music is either reflecting this trend or promoting it.”<sup>8</sup> Whether reflecting or promoting, commentators frequently remarked that

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald E. Kisner, “Is There Too Much Sex in Music Today? The Stars Disagree,” *Jet*, 7 October 1976, 60. Kisner also comments, “Sexual suggestions, be they cutely covert or boldly unwrapped, are the current vogue in songs and it takes a gargantuan search to find a tune that’s bereft of a titillating coo or lyric.”

<sup>8</sup> Judy Spiegelman, “Music and Sex: Strange Bedfellows,” *Soul*, 6 June 1977, 6.

sex and profanity were on the increase in both the lyrics and album art of popular music in the 1970s. Finding its place within the sexualized atmosphere of American culture, popular music contributed to the confusion surrounding appropriate sexual expression and behavior.

The increasingly sexualized nature of music and album art sparked action, controversy and debate documented through articles and letters to the editor in various publications. Sex and music have had a historically tenuous relationship, and the tensions bubbled to the surface once again in the mid-1970s.<sup>9</sup> By that time, however, with American society in the midst of a seemingly great shift in values, at least one editorialist assumed that sexualized cultural products would not elicit much response. To quote Ralph J. Gleason, music critic and founding editor of *Rolling Stone*, “people who listen to today’s music simply do not give a shit about things like this [sexual lyrics] and it is a great social freedom that has come about.”<sup>10</sup> His words were to be shot down less than a year later when, in November 1975, Pastor Charlie Boykin of Lakewood Baptist Church in Tallahassee, Florida, led his youth group in setting fire to more than \$2000 worth of records, citing “their appeal to the flesh” and supposed link to illegitimate pregnancy as their main offenses.<sup>11</sup> The bonfire itself did not raise much interest, but debates over the amount of sex in popular music popped up not infrequently over the next

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<sup>9</sup> For examples of other controversies over sex and music (or dance) see Hamilton, “Making of the Blues Tradition”; Carby, “Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues”; Glenn C. Altschuler, “‘Great Balls of Fire’: Rock ‘n’ Roll and Sexuality,” in *All Shook Up: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); John E. Semoche, “Music and Dance: Stirring the Senses and Unleashing the Beast,” in *Censoring Sex: A Historical Journey through American Media* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); and Kathy Peiss, “Dancing Madness,” in *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in New York City, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986). Marybeth Hamilton, *When I’m Bad, I’m Better: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) is not about music or dance in particular, but provides an excellent overview of twentieth century reactions to sex in entertainment generally through the often controversial figure of Mae West.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph J. Gleason, “Obscenity—Who Really Cares,” *Rolling Stone*, 22 May 1975.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Bane, “Fahrenheit 250: Florida Minister, Flock, Fire Rock,” *Rolling Stone*, 12 February 1976.

two years. Controversy reached a peak in 1977, when Reverend Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) attempted to promote ethical responsibility in musical production and distribution, but discussion had died down by the end of that summer, never coming to a solid resolution.<sup>12</sup>

To those activists and commentators who came out on the side of "too much sex," music in the 1970s had become detrimental to the development of America's youth, especially within the black community. "The music robs our children of their innocence prematurely and ends up with our children having a greater emphasis on their butts and de-emphasizing their brains," Reverend Jackson argued.<sup>13</sup> The many black voices who supported Jackson's campaign agreed that "song writers and singers could have a little more respect for younger children."<sup>14</sup> They resented the increasing amount of sex in culture as a whole (not just music), seeing it as merely exploiting sex for money, rather than a reflection of changes in larger society, and longed for inspirational music or a return to the message music of the late 1960s.<sup>15</sup> Protestors of sexy music clung to concepts of "good moral values" that seemed threatened in the permissive society of the 1970s. To them, sex was a private matter, and its increasing visibility in the public realm was not about sexual freedom as much as it was about the degeneration of a "traditional" moral system. Moreover, the focus on black youth—along with much of the debate

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<sup>12</sup> The battle against sexy songs by Operation PUSH was big entertainment news in 1977. See "PUSH on to Clean Up Sexy Popular Songs," *Jet*, 27 January 1977; Alan Panchansky, "Push Radio Ban: A 'No-Play' Listing for Sex Songs?" *Billboard*, 29 Jan 1977; "Blacks in PUSH Against 'Sex Rock,'" *Variety*, 1 December 1976; "Jesse Jackson Blasts Today's 'Sex' Music" *Soul*, 14 February 1977; Reginald Stuart, "Curb Sought on Airing of Records with Explicit Lyrics," *New York Times*, 14 April 1977; Connie Johnson, "Is There Too Much Sex in Music—The Experts Reply," *Soul*, 6 June 1977.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson quoted in "PUSH On to Clean up Sexy Popular Songs," *Jet*, 27 January 1977, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Wendy Hale, Readers Rap, "Too Much Song Sex," *Jet*, 10 March 1977, 4.

<sup>15</sup> E. McNeal, Reaction, "Too Much Sex?" *Soul*, 18 July 1977; Rev. Leo M. Gray Jr., Readers Rap, "Doesn't Like Sex Songs," *Jet*, 28 October 1976; L. Parker, Reaction, "The Wages of Sin," *Soul*, 4 July 1977, 2.



appearing in the black press—stemmed not only from the fact that many of the sexiest songs were produced by black artists and played on black radio but was also related to the historical commitment to “respectability” within the black middle class, which I discuss below.

For as much ire as this sexy music accumulated, however, Operation PUSH’s campaign had little overall effect on the record industry, and there was as much, if not more, acceptance of the sexualization of pop music as a part of the changes occurring in American society. Some black artists agreed with Reverend Jackson, but most argued that sex and music were naturally related and defended their music as an expected development within a more open society. “If there wasn’t a need to sing about sex people wouldn’t sing about it. So I think there is definitely a desire to hear more about it because, in our Victorian period, we kept it too much to ourselves,” argued Donna Summer. Johnnie Taylor agreed: “The public seems to enjoy songs about sex. This is a different generation. Sex is discussed more freely.”<sup>16</sup> Record company executives shared similar ideas, even if they ultimately defended the music as what they had to produce and sell because it made money at that moment.<sup>17</sup> Their music-buying customers agreed that even young listeners had enough competence to determine what they wanted to listen to, what offended them, and what the proper messages were to take from or ignore in the music they enjoyed. Not the most eloquent attack on Rev. Jackson,

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<sup>16</sup> Summer and Taylor quoted in Kisner, “Too Much Sex,” 60-61. Thelma Houston was also tolerant of sex in music according to Connie Johnson, “Too Much Is Being Made of Sexual Emphasis in Music—Thelma Houston,” *Soul*, 6 June 1977, 16.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, “Jesse Jackson Blasts Today’s ‘Sex’ Music” *Soul*, 14 February 1977, and quotes from Neil Bogart and Reginald Stuart in “Curb Sought on Airings of Records with Explicit Lyrics,” *New York Times*, 14 April 1977.

but certainly one of the most remarkable came from twelve-and-a-half-year-old Caroline Crumpacker who told Rev. Jackson,

You say some of the lyrics in popular songs are ‘harmful’ to children.

Well, a child under 4, 5 or even 6 can’t understand ‘shove it in, shove it out’ from ‘Disco Lady’ or ‘spread your wings and let me come inside’ from ‘Tonight’s The Night’ by Rod Stewart. And a child any older than that has a right to, and in most cases does, know all about sex.<sup>18</sup>

The letter went on to chastise Rev. Jackson for focusing on irrelevant issues and ineffective strategies in a world where most people were no longer offended by curse words or sex and where young people needed much more substantial help than a mere boycotting of songs. Both whites and blacks defended sex in music and did so by denouncing censorship of any kind, pointing out the long history of sexually suggestive music in the black tradition, and arguing that the outrage was out of proportion in relation to the actual influence of music. Most importantly, they argued for the consumer’s right to personal agency in choosing cultural products.<sup>19</sup> By pointing out how there were other, less offensive, musical options available or that sexy music was not detrimental to a youth’s brain development, those who defended the sexy music of the 1970s were engaged in a battle to keep personal freedom alive in the face of controversy.

Within these debates, disco music made the free expression of female sexuality increasingly conventional within mainstream popular culture and became a cultural outlet for the complex issues, freedoms, and concerns that women’s and sexual liberation had unleashed on society. African-American disco divas led this cultural innovation, their complicated historical relationship to respectability and sexuality helping to account for

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<sup>18</sup> Caroline Crumpacker, Letters to the Editor, *Billboard*, 26 March 1977, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Amin, Readers Rap, “Get Down Sexy Songs,” *Jet*, 17 February 1977; Delroy L. King, Reaction, “Sex Rock? Amen!” *Soul*, 4 July 1977; Ivan B. Cohen, Reaction, “Too Much Sex?” *Soul*, 18 July 1977; D. Williams, Reaction, “Don’t Fight It!” *Soul*, 18 July 1977; Ivan St. John, Reaction, “Dear Jesse,” *Soul*, 15 August 1977.

the variations in female representation that disco encompassed. Blacks historically tended to be more comfortable with premarital sex and sexual expression than white, middle-class America, as evidenced by tolerance toward cohabitation, premarital pregnancies, and explicit song lyrics and dance routines, but such tolerance had a class dimension.<sup>20</sup> Middle-class and upwardly mobile blacks practiced a stricter moral code—especially for women—that, while based on concepts of religion and morality, had a largely political dimension propagated to further the cause of racial uplift and to fight racism. This “politics of respectability” called on black girls and women to be chaste and pure, comporting themselves in a way that would protect their virtue and present them as “proper,” ethical, and moral citizens.<sup>21</sup> This attempt at teaching and presenting morality was, in part, a defense against white American stereotypes of black men as dangerous, oversexed studs and black women as either promiscuous, hypersexualized jezebels or asexual, domineering mammies.<sup>22</sup> These racist stereotypes, intermixed with a history of violent exploitation of black women’s bodies by white men, shaped black approaches to sexuality and created what Darlene Clark Hine has termed a “culture of dissemblance” in

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<sup>20</sup> Estelle Freedman and John D’Emilio, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 259.

<sup>21</sup> On respectability and female sexuality in black history see Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: the Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Hazel Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 738-755.

<sup>22</sup> Those books on respectability in black culture also discuss these stereotypes. Also see Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); and Robert Staples, “The Myth of Black Sexual Superiority: A Re-Examination,” in *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffer (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003).

which black women engaged in a self-imposed silence on matters of sexuality in order to claim some form of personal autonomy and control over their womanhood. According to Hine, “To counter negative stereotypes many Black women felt compelled to downplay, even deny, sexual expression.”<sup>23</sup>

Strict moral codes of the black middle class still influenced black sexuality in the 1970s, but many black women carefully navigated the new sexual freedoms to get in touch with their sexuality while avoiding perpetuation of negative stereotypes.<sup>24</sup> As Bonnie Allen summarized in *Essence*,

at the same time we were struggling to be free, we Black women were still grappling with a convoluted sexual identity. The image-makers had always portrayed us as hot-to-trot mamas, and we didn’t want to ‘act our color’ and give them what they expected. But we sure didn’t want to be left out of the good times either . . . . The new sexual freedom took some thought.<sup>25</sup>

For women like Allen, the best result of the sexual revolution was that “a new sexual awareness [was] emerging that seem[ed] to be based on something more than the pleasure principle. It’s simply the idea that each woman is in full control of her body.”<sup>26</sup> Control over their bodies and control over their own pleasure were two empowering actions that black women were able to take from sexual revolution and feminism in the 1970s. Even if they did not yet have a solid movement of minority women to stand

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<sup>23</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 912-920, quote 918.

<sup>24</sup> In the 1970s, many young black women received little information on sexual matters from the older generation still teaching that sex was dirty and for procreation only, even as voices in the middle-class black press discouraged this practice as dangerous and unhealthy for proper social development. See Robert Staples, Ph.D., “Has the Sexual Revolution Bypassed Blacks?” *Ebony*, April 1974; Richard Tyson and Joanne Tyson, “Sex and the Black Woman,” *Ebony*, August 1977; Robert Staples, Ph.D., “The New Sex vs. the Old Ideals,” *Essence*, May 1981. On continued sexual silences in the black community, see Paula Giddings, “The Last Taboo,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, (1979, New York: The New Press, 1995), 414-428.

<sup>25</sup> Bonnie Allen, “The Sexual Revolution—The Price We Pay for ‘Giving It Up,’” *Essence*, February 1983, 61.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

behind them, many black women engaged in and wrote about the importance of their own search for sexual self-fulfillment. For these women, the sexual revolution was important in demanding the control over and respect for their bodies that dominant society had historically denied them and highlighted the ways control over one's own sexual pleasure could help break down stereotypes by garnering respect for the ideas that black women have a right to sexual pleasure (they are not asexual mummies) and that that pleasure is not insatiable and uncontrolled (they are not oversexed jezebels). As the sexual revolution separated sex from reproduction and the sexual activities of blacks and whites converged, sexual stereotypes held less sway in inhibiting black female engagement with sexuality.<sup>27</sup>

However, this was not the case with all black women, especially those who supported the dictates of Black Power and sought to counteract the negative effects of the Moynihan Report. Believing the standard line that black men found assertive and independent women a threat to the "traditional masculine role," some black women were reluctant to upset this delicate balance. As late as 1980, well after the dissolution of the Black Power movement, some black women accepted and deeply believed that supporting their men through submission and baby-raising was their proper role within the black family.<sup>28</sup> Such ideas of female submission, combined with the conservative upbringing of many young black women, limited the impact of women's and sexual

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<sup>27</sup> For statements confirming this trend, see Paula Giddings, "The Last Taboo," 424-425. Giddings admits that racism still affects sexual representations but also argues, "both desegregation and the sexual revolution make dissemblance and suppression in the name of racial solidarity anachronistic . . . Despite the tenacity about ideas of difference, recent sociopolitical developments . . . make binary opposition as a sole indicator of meaning passé." Also see Bebe Moore Campbell, "Sexual Freedom and 'Now' Woman," *Ebony*, August 1982, 62 and Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Morrow, 1984), 354.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Kathleen Bradley's comments in Connie Johnson, "Star Views on Love and Black Men," *Black Stars*, June 1980 and the multiple women who wrote in to say how strongly they agreed with Bradley's position, Black Stars Letters, *Black Stars*, September 1980.

liberation among this segment of the black population, except perhaps to detach the stigma from premarital sex. It did not allow for change in how women approached their sexual pleasure and autonomy. The sexual landscape was confusing for black women, as it was for whites, but having to contend with their “prescribed” role in the betterment of the race, created a unique situation that the supposed universality of the women’s liberation movement could not always accommodate. And yet, it was this same role expectation that would lead some black women into feminism in the 1970s and a flurry more in the 1980s, making liberation about developing themselves as individuals without abandoning their men and improving gender relations in the black community through the lived autonomy of both genders.<sup>29</sup>

The variety of sexual expressions found in disco music paralleled the tensions over respectability and liberation that black women experienced within the “new morality” of the 1970s. Black women had historically been more expressive about sexuality in music, but in genres relegated to exclusively black audiences and slumming whites exploring a night of exoticism and sexual thrills in contrast to the more sedate Victorian strictures that continued to define proper sexual conduct in white, middle-class society (i.e., blues and jazz women).<sup>30</sup> In appealing to white audiences in genres like

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Charlene Crawford, “Speaking Out: The Status of Black Women,” *Ebony*, March 1975 and Barbara Walker, “To Be a Woman: Black Feminism—One Woman’s View,” *Redbook*, March 1976. For more on black feminism see Patricia Hill Collin, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990); bell hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1982); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983); Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*; and Duchess Harris, “From the Kennedy Commission to the Combahee Collective: Black Feminist Organizing, 1960-1980,” in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, eds. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 280-305.

<sup>30</sup> As noted by Patricia Juliana Smith, prior to the “simultaneously passionate and chaste” girl groups of the 1960s, black female vocalists who sang of desire and sexuality “had limited access to mainstream airwaves, and their best recordings were routinely sanitized and covered by ‘nice’ white girls.” See Smith, “Ask

rock and roll, black women had to present themselves as respectable, thus the innocence and propriety of the girl group phenomenon. In dominating disco, the leading pop music genre of the day, many black divas challenged the culture of dissemblance that had dominated their historical relation to sexuality and accorded respectability to sexual expression even as they carefully tread a line that might set them back into jezebel stereotypes. African-American women dominated disco because of its roots in soul, R&B, and funk along with the fact that it promised the most potential for crossover success. These black women, often flaunting their sexual proclivities, attracted white audiences because of the influence women's liberation and the sexual revolution had already had in changing people's perception of sex, and they attracted black audiences because of a (usually) careful tendency to present a complex version of sexuality that made every attempt to avoid a mere objectification of black women as sexually voracious.<sup>31</sup> With the dominance of black female divas in the disco performance industry, the music and its related press acted as a place where black women held conversations about being women and being sexually aware women in the wake of new ideas about such topics for all women. Different disco divas embraced this new sexual liberation to varying extents, but even those who continued a long tradition of the commercial objectification and exploitation of the female form expressed a new and complicated relation to this sexual expression.

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Any Girl': Compulsory Heterosexuality and Girl Group Culture," in *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 95. For more complicated discussions of "slumming" see especially Hamilton, *When I'm Bad, I'm Better*; Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); and Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> For an interesting and parallel interpretation of black female sexuality as represented in the 1974 film *Foxy Brown* see Stephane Dunn, "Foxy Brown on My Mind: The Racialized Gendered Politics of Representation," in *Disco Divas: Women's Popular Culture in the 1970s*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 71-86.

## Labelle and Grace Jones: Changing the Look of the “Girl Group”

In the 1970s, musical expressions of female sexuality included more possibility and explicit variations than that which had come before in mainstream popular music, readily seen in a reworking of what it meant to be a female performer in the pop music industry in terms of both image and message. Since the 1950s onset of rock and roll as the dominant popular music idiom, female vocalists held a small proportion of the pop music charts.<sup>32</sup> The one outstanding exception to this underrepresentation was the girl group phenomenon of the 1960s, a system in which male producers like Phil Spector and Barry Gordy closely controlled all elements of the groups’ presentation. While certain exceptions like the Ronnettes exuded a toughness that contrasted with the innocence and passivity of most others, girl groups sang almost exclusively about romance and singular devotion to a man with only muted sexual references in matching dresses and perfectly polished mannerisms.<sup>33</sup> By the mid-1960s, men once again dominated the charts, but the social changes of the era influenced music across the board into the 1970s. Exceptional female vocalists like Janis Joplin found a prominent place in psychedelic rock by taking on the bawdy sexuality of her fellow male artists, and soul women began challenging notions of propriety to such extents that the ultimate girl group, the Supremes, had a hit

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<sup>32</sup> According to Reebee Garofalo, “Once rock and roll took over, women declined on the year-end pop charts from a high of 33 percent in 1954 to a low of just 8 percent three years later.” Reebee Garofalo, “Off the Charts: Outrage and Exclusion in the Eruption of Rock and Roll,” in *American Popular Music: New Approaches to the Twentieth Century*, eds. Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 124-125. On the male dominance of rock also see Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> For more on girl groups see Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out: Popular Music in the USA* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 153-158; Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), 83-98; Smith, “Ask Any Girl,” 93-125; and Charlotte Grieg, *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow? Girl Groups from the 50s On* (London: Virago, 1989). I do not intend to deny the significance of girl groups speaking to female fans in the girl culture of the 1960s, as many of these authors stress. I merely suggest that the realm of their lyrics and presentation, especially in terms of sexuality, was not as explicit or varied as disco divas in the 1970s.



singing about an illegitimate “Love Child” in 1968. R&B women such as Aretha Franklin frequently sang of “Respect” and relational discontent, but the “Queen of Soul” and most others refrained from raunchy explicitness and remained clothed in relatively unrevealing attire.<sup>34</sup> In the early 1970s, a wave of white female singer-songwriters did not deny an active female sexuality, but sang of it largely in terms of love and emotion and addressed their concerns in comfortable, reserved clothing. Indeed, because female singer-songwriters “in many ways conformed to social expectations about women’s musical performance style and subject matter, they weren’t threatening.”<sup>35</sup> Only gradually in the 1970s did female vocalists begin to take on an explicitness about their sexual pleasure and expression. The disco divas, however, brought this change to the pop charts in a dominant and sensational fashion that felt no need to equate female sexuality with love. In doing so, they redefined the bounds of female performance style in ways that threatened the sensibilities of some while empowering others.

Labelle, whose disco hit “Lady Marmalade” made it to #1 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in March of 1975, most vividly illustrates the 1970s deviation from the “girl group” formula. The members of Labelle had themselves begun their career in the 1960s girl-group mold as Pattie Labelle and Blue Belles, finding modest success with the singles “I

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<sup>34</sup> On Janice Joplin, see Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music*, chp. 4. Most studies of soul music focus their discussions largely on men, with only limited substantive discussion of soul women, focused mostly on the Supremes and Aretha Franklin, suggesting a dominance of men in soul as well as rock. See, for example, Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (New York: Times Books, 1984); Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); and Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> Kutulas, “1970s Women’s Music,” 178. Also see Caroline Krasnow, “The Development of Aesthetic Ideology in Popular Music: Rock and Disco in the Nineteen Seventies,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999), 181-182. It should be noted that while both these scholars point out the tendency for female singer-songwriters to fit standard expectations of “feminine” performance—placing them more in the feminine-identified realm of pop than the masculine-identified realm of rock—they each come to very different conclusions concerning the intent of singer-songwriters and in their comparisons to disco divas.

Sold My Heart to the Junkman” and “Down the Aisle (Wedding Song).” Early in the new decade, during a trip to England, the group decided to join forces with a new manager, Vicki Whitman, who worked to revamp their image. Their initial return to the American music scene was limited to an underground cult-based audience, but when they teamed up with costume designer Larry LeGaspi and music producer Allen Toussaint in 1974, the trio procured an audience that included both “cult-like admirers and astonished throngs of square types.”<sup>36</sup> In the process of this metamorphosis, they not only changed their name to Labelle; their style went from a pristine and polished soul act to a futuristically costumed, politically outspoken, and sexually liberated rock-inspired mix of music and theatricality. Their new image included social commentary, sexual frankness, and emotional intensity in music described by Nona Hendryx as “a conglomeration of rock, rhythm and blues, soul, jazz, and gospel.”<sup>37</sup> By making *Nightbirds* a commercially successful, gold-certified album that critics described as “danceable as well as provocative,” Labelle garnered a broader audience, earned the title Disco Artists of the Year from *Billboard*, and became musical superstars who hit it so big they made history by being the first black pop group to perform in New York City’s Metropolitan Opera House.<sup>38</sup> Labelle would go on to release two more albums—*Phoenix* and *Chameleon*—to high critical acclaim and moderate commercial success before the dissolution of the group late in 1977.

They also became women associated with an open and aggressive sexuality, reinforcing a message of individual freedom, expression, and acceptance, which they put

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<sup>36</sup>Martin Weston, “Labelle,” *Ebony*, May 1976, 102. Also see Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 118-120.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick Salvo, “Sexiest Singers in Show Business,” *Sepia*, March 1976, 48.

<sup>38</sup> George Whitmore, “Labelle,” *The Advocate*, 26 February 1975, 25; Disco Artist of the Year according to advertisement, with Labelle in their stage costumes in *Billboard*, 28 February 1976, 65.

forth both visually and lyrically. Article after article in the mid-1970s included photographs and descriptions of the outrageous costumes and stage activities Labelle used in performances. Their costumes included feathers and fur, skin-tight body suits, bare skin, futuristic designs, metallic accents, even handcuffs and a whip. Combined with “frantic and sensual dance” that involved “continuously thrusting their bodies forward,” Labelle had come a long way from the empire dresses, wigs, and polished choreography of its 1960s girl-group past.<sup>39</sup> In Labelle’s public image, “the invitation to sex is there for all to fantasize and indulge in,” and that image challenged historical dictates that resigned women, especially black women, to sexual passivity, purity, and silence in their public comportment.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, Labelle meant for their wild and sexy veneer to catalyze a message of personal freedom. As Patti Labelle explained in an interview for *Discotheekin*: “The costumes are part of us . . . When people see a poster and see us with glitter, they will come to see us. After we have them in our hands, they then realize we are more than glitter. They can close their eyes and then be able to get into us, as we are able to get into them.”<sup>41</sup> Wild, sexy abandon helped Labelle stand out, as did their success in the emerging disco market, but Labelle was not dedicated to the disco label and were focused on their audiences moving beyond it.<sup>42</sup> The wild costumes, disco-oriented production techniques, and overt sexuality—all the trappings of Labelle’s new commercial

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<sup>39</sup> G. Fitz Bartley, “A Visual Joy,” *Soul*, 25 November 1974, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Salvo, “Sexiest Singers in Show Business,” 46-47.

<sup>41</sup> Patti Labelle quoted in Rene Hewitt, “Labelle is More Than Glitter!” *Discotheekin*, September 1976, 14. Also see Alan Ebert, “After 16 Years a Trio Breaks Up: Labelle: A Whodunit,” *Essence*, February 1978, 73, in which Nona Hendryx reiterates Patti’s statement on the purpose of Labelle’s glitter.

<sup>42</sup> Nona Hendryx explained, “We do what we have to do and do it. If we do an album and we like it, and it turns out to be disco, we’ll do it. If that’s the way you hear the album, that’s the way it is. . . . Different people have different interpretations of it. . . . After people get to know us, they understand we are not all disco.” Quoted in Hewitt, “More Than Glitter!” 14.

success—were meant merely as an entry into the group’s larger message. As cultural critic Frank Rose put it in reviewing *Chameleon*, “Labelle is more inclined to comment on the disco phenomenon than to capitalize on it; their ambition is to shuffle minds, not feet.”<sup>43</sup> In shuffling those minds, they put forward a worldview of unconventionality, individuality, frank discussion, personal freedom, and nonjudgmental acceptance.

Labelle’s message of personal freedom supported strong women, in life and love, as well as an open and liberated sexuality for all people. “All Girl Band” spoke to the realities of working women “dealing with the facts and the pain” of “trying to make it on their own far away from home,” which publicly acknowledged that women were not singularly concerned with home, childcare, or love and emotion. The singers insisted that their men “Don’t Bring Me Down” but “Lift me up higher” because “It’s time to be a lover/And not just undercover,” voicing black feminist concerns that men expand their emotional realm to support black women as well as themselves. “Get You Somebody New” was a non-ambiguous rejection of relationships with sexist men, with the women singing, “If you want somebody to be your slave/Get you somebody new/If you want somebody that you can save/Get you somebody new/If you need somebody that you can hurt/Get you somebody new.”<sup>44</sup> It spoke of women who refused to meet traditional feminine expectations of passivity and submission, and *Soul* described the song as “an I-love-you-but-I-won’t-let-you-kick-my-butt song,” urging “ladies, [to] listen and relate!”<sup>45</sup> And the women were not shy about expressing how much “You Turn Me On” saying, “I come like the pouring rain each time you call my name/It’s good what you’re doing, what

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<sup>43</sup> Frank Rose, Review of *Chameleon*, *Rolling Stone*, 7 October 1976, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Lyrics by Allen Toussaint, performed by Labelle, “All Girl Band,” and “Don’t Bring Me Down,” *Nightbirds*, compact disc (New York: CBS Records, 1974), Epic 33075. Lyrics by Joe Crane, performed by Labelle, “Get You Somebody New,” *Chameleon*, LP (New York: CBS Records, 1976), PE34189.

<sup>45</sup> Highlight Album, Labelle, *Chameleon, Soul*, 11 October 1976, 15.

you're doing."<sup>46</sup> In vocalizing their discontent and passion, Labelle confidently projected feminist messages that differed from the respectable girl groups of a decade earlier.

The most successful song the group performed was the controversial hit single "Lady Marmalade," which in its very controversiality was reflective of the essence of Labelle. A sexy song about a Creole prostitute in New Orleans that included the French refrain "Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?"—translated, do you want to sleep with me tonight?—"Lady M' was surely not the kind of song associated with the 'typical black girl group.'"<sup>47</sup> As such, a group of black Catholic mothers in New Orleans urged radio stations to remove the song from their playlists and CBS television had Labelle alter the refrain to "do you want to *dance* with me?"<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, the song was popular, "its catchy, yet highly controversial French refrain . . . repeated with aggressive abandon by everyone from housewives to school children."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps these listeners did not know the proper translation; perhaps they knew and did not care; perhaps they were embracing the aggressive, outspoken sexuality that women's liberation had fostered. No matter the explanation of its popularity, "Lady Marmalade" became something of a household name, contributed to disco's ascendance as the dominant popular music format, and made Labelle what *Sepia* called "the sexiest singers in show business."<sup>50</sup> In singing such a controversial song that also garnered widespread popularity, the women of Labelle engaged in debates concerning proper sexual expression for women and challenged the long-practiced "politics of respectability" of the black middle-class.

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<sup>46</sup> Lyrics by Nona Hendryx, performed by Labelle, "You Turn Me On," *Nightbirds*.

<sup>47</sup> Salvo, "Sexiest Singers in Show Business," 46.

<sup>48</sup> Art Harris, "It's So Good: It's Labelle," *Rolling Stone*, 3 July 1975, 46.

<sup>49</sup> Salvo, "Sexiest Singers in Show Business," 46.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

Both Patti Labelle and Nona Hendryx had reservations about and felt the backlash against “Lady M,” but they both defended it in terms of personal freedom and the open discussion needed for that freedom to be accepted. Patti said, “We just felt it was a good song to do because we needed something to lighten up the album a bit. . . . But dodging something that’s real, like prostitution, is ridiculous. I won’t hide in a closet and pretend it doesn’t happen. But it makes me sad that people think that ‘Lady Marmalade’ is all that Labelle is about.”<sup>51</sup> She certainly wished that people would hear their message beyond an association with a controversial sexual lifestyle, but she was not about to deny that approaching that lifestyle in song was better than pretending it did not exist as a fact of life for many women. Similarly, Nona Hendryx told *Penthouse*, “When we did ‘Lady Marmalade’ . . . we had women’s groups saying we were denigrating the black female. If I really went into what I thought about that sort of criticism it would take a very long time and I’d be likely to lose my temper.”<sup>52</sup> For women who so strongly believed in personal freedom and individuality, the idea that other women would question the discussion of prostitution or believe that they sang in uncritical celebration of it was insulting, and each woman defended the song in terms of the message they were trying to get across.

The sexual freedom that comes with an understanding of oneself as a strong woman permeated many of Labelle’s songs, but their music also celebrated sex as natural and pleasurable in all situations, which a diverse audience appreciated. “It’s a part of life that’s real, and we try to project it joyously,” said Patti Labelle.<sup>53</sup> She defended Labelle’s celebration of sex in spiritual terms that could apply to anyone, even if her connection to

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<sup>51</sup> Labelle quoted in *Ibid.*, 51. *Rolling Stone* attributed the same quote to Nona Hendryx. See Harris, “It’s So Good.”

<sup>52</sup> Hendryx quoted in Mick Brown, “Take Three Girls,” *Penthouse* 14, no. 8 (1979): 20.

<sup>53</sup> Salvo, “Sexiest Singers in Show Business,” 47.

it was in heterosexual terms, saying, “When I’m up there singing, it’s like I’m with my husband on our honeymoon.”<sup>54</sup> For Hendryx, the message was even more open: “I like appealing to both men and women. I have no preferences. I don’t limit myself. I’m all sexes. I don’t know what a heterosexual or a homosexual or a bisexual or a monosexual is. I don’t understand the differences.”<sup>55</sup> Considering that Hendryx wrote most of Labelle’s material, this open sexuality came out in lyrics that often did not specify male or female subjects, and whatever their differences, all three members of Labelle agreed that sexy is just a state of mind, fitting with their message of individual personal freedom.<sup>56</sup> There was a progressive spirit that attracted a mixed audience of whites and blacks, heterosexuals and homosexuals.<sup>57</sup> And Labelle’s audience valued their message, as illustrated by a fan’s comments after a 1977 concert: “‘She told us that she appreciated us having the courage, as women, to say the things we say in our music,’ Patti recounts. ‘She told us that we were singing as women, for women, but fortunately men were relating to our message as well.’”<sup>58</sup> Labelle reached across boundaries of gender and sexuality and was a disco act that lesbians vocally endorsed. A member of the Atlanta Feminist Lesbian Alliance testified, “Lesbians love Labelle. To us, they’re very together women who love people and each other. And they have a heavy feminist message.”<sup>59</sup> Their audience adopted their personal freedom mantra, attending concerts in fanciful garb that rivaled that of the performing women themselves, and wrote in to their favorite

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>55</sup> Hendryx quoted in Art Harris, “It’s So Good,” 42-43.

<sup>56</sup> Connie Johnson, “Labelle: Going Beyond ‘Oh, Baby, I Love You So,’” *Soul*, 17 January 1977, 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Rolling Stone* stated that an Atlanta concert “brought out an 80/20 black/white mix of friendly bizarros, tinselled gays, lesbians, hip middle class.” See Harris, “It’s So Good,” 42.

<sup>58</sup> Johnson, “Going Beyond ‘Oh, Baby, I Love You So,’” 5.

<sup>59</sup> As quoted in Harris, “It’s So Good,” 43.

magazines declaring that “LaBelle is an extremely talented group and a group with a message; not only for Blacks but for people in general.”<sup>60</sup>

Through their message-oriented music, Labelle provided a new and progressive template for what was possible in the realm of popular music by and for women. Nona Hendryx once asserted that Labelle’s socially aware music in combination with their new audience-drawing style would “make a difference in girl groups that will come after us. They won’t be restricted in having to be like so-and-so. Be like what you are.”<sup>61</sup>

Journalists agreed that Labelle and “Lady M” had “redefined the image of black female girl groups.”<sup>62</sup> The group had no Top 40 hits after “Lady M,” but their critical success, loyal fan base, and extensive press coverage opened doors for a new generation of black female singers who wanted to produce socially aware and sexually honest music that people could dance to. Their image of “space-age chic, spiced with a tough and assertive sexuality” became “the model for a new generation of black lady singers.”<sup>63</sup>

One disco diva, Grace Jones, went beyond even Labelle when it came to assertive sexuality and freedom of expression, playing with gender and sexuality to such an extent that it was not uncommon for people to mistake her for a man, transvestite, or drag queen. Born in Jamaica, to a clergyman father, Grace Jones moved with her family to the United States as a teenager in the mid-1960s. After studying theater and spending some time as an actress, Jones became a successful model in New York City and Paris in the 1970s. First recording in Paris, Jones signed with Island Records and arrived on the American disco scene in 1977, with the release of her *Portfolio* album and its singles

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<sup>60</sup> John R. Young, Reaction, “LaBelle’s Due,” *Soul*, 17 February 1975.

<sup>61</sup> Hendryx quoted in “Stop the Train, Ride Labelle,” *Soul*, 3 March 1975, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Johnson, “Going Beyond ‘Oh, Baby, I Love You So,’” 5.

<sup>63</sup> Brown, “Take Three Girls,” 20.



“Sorry/That’s The Trouble,” “I Need A Man,” and “La Vie en Rose,” each of which cracked the top ten on *Billboard’s* Disco/Dance chart (I Need A Man reached #1 on that chart).<sup>64</sup> The industry welcomed her with praises such as *Billboard’s* Most Promising New Disco Artist and declarations that she was “the hottest, most outrageous newcomer to storm the disco scene.”<sup>65</sup> Yet, critics agreed universally that Grace Jones was not the most talented singer on the disco circuit. Her talent was never as important as her stage presence. Jones herself admitted that she did not have the best voice, but she viewed this as a positive aspect that made her more interesting as a “total entertainer”: “My lack of singing is my strong point. All other black singers sing with a gospel background, I have a fresh sound. I create controversy.”<sup>66</sup> The controversy she created originated from her willingness to push the boundaries of gender identity, racial construction, and sexual expression. All in all, Grace Jones was “a question mark followed by an exclamation point. . . . a woman of mystery” who took disco’s moment of expressive opportunity to its most extreme points.<sup>67</sup>

One of the most transgressive aspects of Jones’s repertoire was her penchant for androgyny in appearance, theatrics, and lyrics. The costumes she wore in publicity photographs, album covers, and stage shows only enhanced her ambiguous physical features—a tall, muscular frame combined with closely cropped hairstyle (from bald to

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<sup>64</sup> Biographical information collected from various profiles written on Grace Jones in the 1970s. Also see *The World of Grace Jones*, <http://www.theworldofgracejones.com>.

<sup>65</sup> Mark Zweigler, “Keeping Up with Grace Jones,” *After Dark*, December 1977, 73. Also see Nik Cohn, “Amazing Grace,” *New York*, 15 August 1977, 50, which explains that “‘I Need A Man,’ was *the* disco hit of this Manhattan summer”; “Grace Jones: From Europe’s Model to Disco Diva,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 22 July 1978, which describes her as an “internationally acclaimed disco-diva and a celebrity of superstar proportions”; and an “Islandbio” (Island Records Bio) of Grace Jones dated 0580, which uses such adjectives as “fierce, consuming and inexhaustibly creative” in Frederick D. Murphy Papers, Box 1, Correspondence, etc, Folder 1/10.

<sup>66</sup> Stan West, “An Interview with Grace Jones,” *Black Stars*, May 1981, 26.

<sup>67</sup> Lynn Norment, “The Outrageous Grace Jones,” *Ebony*, July 1979, 90.

flattop). Her costumes varied between masculine and feminine and included a floor-length wedding veil, boxer trunks, skimpy spandex revealing great amounts of skin, topless skirts, a naval officer's uniform, haute couture gowns, and tailored suits—sometimes many variations in a single concert.<sup>68</sup> To her artistic-director boyfriend, Jean-Paul Goude, Jones's feminine beauty was emphasized and at its best when dressed in her more gender-bending costumes: "When Grace is dressed in a mini skirt, wearing conventional female attire, she looks . . . somewhat masculine. But if she wears *male* attire, the femininity of her features is immediately revealed, enhanced. The same goes for her haircut. . . . For some reason, Grace's beauty is enhanced by that [flattop] hairdo."<sup>69</sup> This unconventional beauty attracted him to her and colored his production of her visuals during their time together. To other, more distanced observers, her androgynous nature was only one part of a performer they found confusing and fascinating. One critic declared that "From a distance, she must have looked like Muhammad Ali in drag," and as late as November 1981, the *Washington Post* claimed that "there are some who still refuse to believe Jones is a woman, even though she has had a child."<sup>70</sup> *Ebony's* feature article on the star in July 1979 best expressed popular sentiment:

Just who is this Grace Jones—this 'disco goddess' as she is often billed; the 'sex freak' who bares her breasts and most other parts of her body to screaming crowds, that sculptured Black face and skinny legs who wears strikingly beautiful clothes; that bald head with an off-center part painted in gold? She speaks with an accent, so is she European? African? South American? Isn't she really a man? Did she have a sex change?<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Joe X. Price, Talent in Action, Grace Jones, Whisky, Los Angeles, *Billboard*, 16 December 1978, 46.

<sup>69</sup> Jean-Paul Goude (edited by Harold Hayes), *Jungle Fever* (New York: Xavier Moreau, 1981), 105-6.

<sup>70</sup> Nik Cohn, "Amazing Grace," *New York*, 15 August 1977, 50; Richard Harrington, "Grace on the Cutting Edge," *Washington Post*, 24 November 1981; "Mistakes Grace For Man in Ladies' Room," *Jet*, 18 October 1979, 16.

<sup>71</sup> Norment, "Outrageous Grace Jones," 90.

These kinds of questions were what defined the impact of Grace Jones as part of the disco world. In making people question her gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, it had the potential of encouraging them to rethink the stereotypes and expectations that shaped their everyday lives.

Jones furthered her physical and sartorial androgyny through her lyrics and performances on stage. For example, “That’s the Trouble” is Grace Jones singing about a fear of marriage, which readily went against all stereotypes of women needing to be in a committed relationship in order to be fulfilled. The lyrics, co-written by Jones, tell the story of a man who follows Jones during a walk at night, quickly falls in love, and asks her to marry him. The situation causes Jones to sing about how “That’s the trouble/Every man I see taking every little thing so heavily/That’s the trouble if you want to let you be/That’s the trouble if you really want to be free.”<sup>72</sup> As disco writer Vince Aletti noted in interviewing the star, “That’s the kind of song that men always used to make about women,” to which Grace Jones replied in the affirmative: “Exactly! I feel like a man does (laughs)—it’s me, but putting it as if I am a man. Because it’s true—that happens to women too.”<sup>73</sup> Jones admitted her own personal fear of marriage to *Sepia*, revealing how much the song was the reflection of a woman choosing to approach life in a way that went against the grain.<sup>74</sup>

To accompany these non-traditional lyrics, Jones performed characteristically macho roles onstage by riding in on a motorcycle, boxing with audience members, and sexually dominating men with whips. Her onstage theatrics made her androgynous

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<sup>72</sup> Lyrics by Grace Jones and P. Papadiamondis, performed by Grace Jones, “That’s the Trouble,” *Portfolio*, compact disc, (New York: Island Records, 1977), 422 842 614-2.

<sup>73</sup> Vince Aletti, “Grace Jones: New Disco Diva,” *Interview*, January 1977, 23.

<sup>74</sup> Denise Mourgues-Rudolph, “Disco’s Grace Jones: Bald, Beautiful, & Bold,” *Sepia*, April 1978, 40.

image one that overlapped with an explicit and aggressive sexuality, further transgressing the bounds of “proper” feminine behavior. Jones put on a performance dripping with sexuality. Described as everything from “kinky” and “sensual” to “the pornography of glamour” and “S&M chic,” reporters never missed a chance to comment on the sexual suggestiveness of a Grace Jones concert.<sup>75</sup> But Jones exuded and celebrated more than just an explicit sexuality; hers was an aggressive one. A large portion of her stage act found her flanked by scantily clad men and interacting with her audience, which groped and grabbed at a chance to touch and fondle their “disco goddess.” And no matter what antics occurred, Grace Jones was always the one in charge of the sexual situation she performed, taking on the role of “professional dominator.”<sup>76</sup> The highlight and finale of the act was her rendition of “I Need a Man” where she stalked the stage with a long leather whip, “singing . . . in tones that spoke more of a warning than a plea” and inspected the male dancers onstage wearing only black jock straps. Occasionally, she would slap the dancers’ bare buttocks and, ultimately unsatisfied, would grab and command men from the audience to undress for her, causing her to become “almost lost in a sea of sweaty, gyrating bodies.”<sup>77</sup> On the disco stage, Grace Jones was a woman who celebrated her sexuality as aggressively as any man.

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<sup>75</sup> Zweigler, “Keeping up with Grace Jones,” 75; Dennis Hunt, “The S&M Chic of Grace Jones,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 November 1980; “Grace Jones Gives Them What They Want and More,” *Jet*, 17 August 1978, 22-23; Albert Goldman, *Disco* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1978), 6-7; Richard Cromelin, “At the Whisky: Grace Jones in an Exotic Pose,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 December 1978.

<sup>76</sup> Stephen Holden, “Pop-Disco: Grace Jones,” *New York Times*, 8 August 1981; or as Denise Mourgues-Rudolph put it, “overseeing a chorus line of near-nude males clearly under her control.” See Mourgues-Rudolph, “Disco’s Grace Jones,” 39.

<sup>77</sup> Description taken mostly from Ann Marie Lipinski, “Reigning in the Disco,” *Chicago Tribune*, 7 January 1979 and Norment, “Outrageous Grace Jones,” 85. For other descriptions of Jones’s “I Need a Man” stage performance see: Zweigler, “Keeping Up with Grace Jones,” 75; Hunt, “S&M Chic of Grace Jones”; Goldman, *Disco*, 6-7. Described by Cromelin, “At the Whisky,” as the “group-grope finale.”

Like Labelle, Jones's initial audience was a cult audience made up of gay men and other outcasts from square society. The nature of this audience added an extra complication and sense of ambiguity to her performances, as her boyfriend, Goude, explained in his memoir: "The ambiguity of her act is that she herself *looked* like a man, a man singing 'I Need a Man' to a bunch of men."<sup>78</sup> The chorus must have struck a different chord with an audience who shared her love for the male sex, and her androgynous sexual domination encouraged gay audiences in their own pursuits of sexual adventure and the rights to enjoy their sexual lifestyle without shame. For Mel Cheren, financial backer of Paradise Garage and founder of West End Records, Grace Jones "epitomized the untamable, anything-goes atmosphere of these last disco days before AIDS." In trying to explain why so many gay men adored her, he says, "because she, like we, defied convention at every turn. . . . Because she turned the tables on society, using its own techniques and methods to transform herself into a star."<sup>79</sup> Her complication of convention attracted her core audience, and knowing such controversy generated attention, she used the same outrageous expression to find success and continued adoration from straights and gays alike.

In short order, her outrageous theatricality garnered Jones mention and praise in such mainstream media outlets as *People* and the *Washington Post*; television appearances on shows like *Dinah!*, *Merv Griffin*, and *Midnight Express*; and performances at such famed New York City dance halls as the Savoy and Roseland. The wider reach of these venues meant that Jones presented her act to an audience of mixed

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<sup>78</sup> Goude, *Jungle Fever*, 102.

<sup>79</sup> Mel Cheren, *Keep on Dancin': My Life and the Paradise Garage* (New York: 24 Hours for Life, 2000), 282-283.

racess and sexual preferences. Cult audiences may have flocked to her concerts no matter what the venue, but they certainly could not have constituted exclusive crowds.

Moreover, the management of Les Mouches discotheque in New York City took the time in May of 1979, to write in to *People* clarifying, “we are no longer gay and have not been for two years.”<sup>80</sup> In Ft. Lauderdale, Jones played to a packed, mostly white audience that the author specifically detailed as *not* predominantly gay.<sup>81</sup> Even Caroline Kennedy was reported to be a Grace Jones fan as early as April 1978.<sup>82</sup> Jones made a splash in the world of gay disco because of the way she celebrated their values of expression through androgyny and sexuality, but these same controversial characteristics also caused middle-of-the-road disco fans to take notice. *People* claimed that Jones “sterilized” her act in order to appear in many of the most mainstream venues, but her theatrics maintained much of the androgyny and aggression that defined her fame, and her participation in the disco world safeguarded her association with sex.<sup>83</sup> Grace Jones had a reputation for unabashed sexual expression, and it was not lost on her audiences, even after she hit the mainstream. In many ways, the descriptions of Jones most emphasized the erotic nature of her act and music.

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<sup>80</sup> H. Finkelstein, Mail, “Les Mouches, New York City,” *People*, 14 May 1979, 11.

<sup>81</sup> Norment, “The Outrageous Grace Jones,” 86.

<sup>82</sup> Mourgess-Rudolph, “Disco’s Grace Jones,” 42. Further evidence of Jones’s appeal as a mainstream, rather than underground disco star include: Karen Lustgarten recommending “La Vie en Rose” as music to practice to in her book *The Complete Guide to Disco Dancing* (New York: Warner Books, 1978) and Kitty Hanson declaring Jones the uncrowned queen of underground gay discos (Le Jardin, in particular) before the “square world discovered her” in her book *Disco Fever* (New York: New American Library, 1978), 112. Robert Hilburn of the *Los Angeles Times*, interestingly, claims that Jones only became mainstream in 1981. See Robert Hilburn, “Pop Music,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 August 1981.

<sup>83</sup> Adjective “sterilized” from Leslie Wohlfer, “Couples: Grace Jones and Jean-Paul Goude’s kinky love affair,” *People*, 23 April 1979, 104. Also see <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMueQZsnvsY>>. In this video Jones performs “Below the Belt,” from her 1978 *Fame* album, in front of a mixed-race audience. Using a boxing motif and playfully tormenting men in the front row, she maintains the androgyny and aggressiveness that defined her underground persona, but tones down the sexuality by wearing a flesh-toned leotard under her cropped top instead of the half-exposed breasts that often appeared in photographs of the star.

The black press covered Jones throughout her American career because her success was an achievement to celebrate for a population familiar with survival and struggle. These magazines and newspapers tended to present the star in a fairly straight forward manner, telling her story and describing her performances, not ignoring sexuality by any means but, with few exceptions, not sensationalizing it either. In fact, the black press was more likely than conventional periodicals to present a more complete portrait of the star as dominatrix onstage but sensitive and unassuming offstage, and for the most part, reader reaction was positive. Those who wrote in to black-oriented magazines praised her uniqueness and great talent as an entertainer. Walter Greene of New York City found Grace Jones to be a positive source of inspiration and commended *Ebony* for its coverage of the star. Senese Davis of Suffolk, Virginia, praised Jones as “a great teacher,” in addition to being “a great star,” because of “her great sense of humor, her style of living, her entertainment, her audience and most of all, the way she feels about herself and her talents.” Sue Kliewer professed her love for the diva in *Ebony*, describing her with such varied adjectives as resistless, hydro-dynamic, smouldry, singular, and super-sensational.<sup>84</sup> A wide variety of people loved the “ebony temptress”—straight and gay, black and white.

Yet, positive response to the star was not universal among the black population, and there was just reason for the negative response. Margaret Buckhanon of Nyack, New York, wrote *Ebony* to complain about the attention Grace Jones was getting in the media: “What a big joke Grace Jones is! She is the perverted fantasy White people have of

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<sup>84</sup> Carl Thomas, Black Stars Letters, “Grace Jones,” *Black Stars*, April 1979, 4; Walter Greene, Letters to the Editor, “Grace Jones,” *Ebony*, September 1979, 14; Senese Davis, Black Stars Letters, “Grace Jones,” *Black Stars*, April 1979, 4; Sue Kliewer, “Grace Jones,” *Ebony*, October 1979, 20.

Blacks. The majority of her audience is White. Please find a more worthwhile person who has given our people something positive.”<sup>85</sup> This reader was denouncing the common practice of the conventional press to sensationalize the sexuality of Grace Jones by enhancing their descriptions with animal imagery reminiscent of the kind of savage metaphors used to describe black Americans for centuries. For example, Nik Cohn, *New York* reporter whose work inspired *Saturday Night Fever*, described his first encounter with Grace Jones:

I looked up and saw a reborn Amazon. Deep black, close to six feet tall . . . She had cropped hair, cheekbones curved like scimitars, an all-devouring mouth. Her naked shoulders and thighs were muscular, as taut as a jungle cat’s, and her eyes cut through like lasers.

I stared. She stared me down. Sweat glistened on her forehead and throat, on her upper lip. She showed her teeth, and she smelled very strong, of blackness and sex, of earth.<sup>86</sup>

Cohn likened Grace Jones to an “Amazon” and “jungle cat,” two frequent metaphors used to describe the diva that placed her somewhere outside the realm of respectable humanity and inside the realm of animals and indigenous “savages.” Other writers compared Jones to a cobra, panther, or goddess from hell.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps even more unsettling is Cohn’s association of Jones’s blackness directly with sex as well as earth, suggesting the correlation of race and sex to be something natural and organic.

Similarly, many writers used the Amazon metaphor as a way to describe the connection between Jones’s sexuality and the adoration of her fans. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* described Jones’s “Amazon body” as one that made the audience appear frumpy by comparison and wrote that the audience “came quaking to the stage, dancing

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<sup>85</sup> Margaret Buckhanon, Letters to the Editor, “Grace Jones,” *Ebony*, September 1979, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Cohn, “Amazing Grace,” 50.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Zweigler, “Keeping Up with Grace Jones,” 73 and Charles Herschberg, “Outrageous Grace,” *The Advocate*, 8 February 1978, 25.



and clapping and lifting her to the skies like a sacrificial offering to some disco god.”<sup>88</sup> Other journalists wrote that “her performances provoke her audience to respond like natives glorying in the splendor of a perfect full moon”<sup>89</sup> Perhaps most explicit in this kind of imagery was Albert Goldman in his book *Disco*. Goldman claimed Jones, “the Disco Goddess,” looked “like an African sculpture” and went into great detail describing “her classic African body” which “she displays arrogantly before the hungry eyes of her admirers”—its “long, skinny shanks,” “abruptly flaring thighs,” “tight fisticuff breasts” and “skull knotted painfully into cornrows.” He assigned “savage” tendencies to her fans also: “her rock-hard, black body is being fondled like a tribal fetish. Revealed and concealed, caressed and chastised, worshipped and defiled. She is held out as the ultimate symbol of the female principle, the feline essence, the cat goddess before whom every gay must prostrate himself in envy and adoration.”<sup>90</sup> His detailed description of Jones’s racial aspects suggest that his book’s larger argument concerning the transcendent power of disco can only be induced by this racial “other.” In extending the metaphor to the admiration of her audience in this Studio 54 New Years’ concert, he insinuated that fans adored this woman in such an otherworldly fashion only because of an age-old fascination with her “African” body. When written in the gay press, such imagery underscored their celebration of a chosen lifestyle, in part, by taking away Jones’s femininity and focusing on the androgyny and fantasy. When written in the mainstream media, whether intentional or not, such descriptions acted as a way to minimize, undermine, and neutralize the subversive potential of Jones as well as the

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<sup>88</sup> Lipinski, “Reigning in the Disco.”

<sup>89</sup> Herschberg, “Outrageous Grace,” 26.

<sup>90</sup> Goldman, *Disco*, 6-7.

larger goals of freedom of expression, especially sexual expression, that she shared with her largely gay fan base.

While animal and “savage” imagery worked in complicated ways in the representation of Grace Jones, Jones herself was comfortable with and encouraged the image in various ways. In fact, she once told *Black Stars*, “it’s better not to work at all than to take on roles and films that degrade the black female—or any female, for that matter.”<sup>91</sup> Jones did not find her image degrading; rather she found it honest. Well aware of the animal image the media had created for her, she exploited it to her advantage, allowing photographers to take her picture in cages in various stages of undress multiple times. When Charles Herschberg of *The Advocate* asked what image she was trying to project she explained that she herself was not trying to project a specific image, but that “whatever image I have is so outrageous, I can do just anything.” She continued, “I guess that’s why they call me an *animal*. I’m born wild. I mean, I’m not gonna bite anybody, but I want to make my own boundaries. I don’t want no cages built around me!”<sup>92</sup> Ironically, by putting herself in a cage for photographers and audiences, she felt she had created an image that allowed her to make her own boundaries and perform in ways that represented the freedom of expression by which she lived. Unlike other stars who tried using the press to rectify the overly sexual connotations of their disco images, Jones was comfortable with and encouraged her own controversial persona. When asked, “How important is sex appeal in putting a song across?” in the *New York Daily News*, Grace Jones defended her performances by appealing to the sexual connotations of disco. According to Jones, “There is so much movement and emotion

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<sup>91</sup> M. George Haddad, “Grace Jones: I Still Lack Love,” *Black Stars*, February 1979, 54.

<sup>92</sup> Jones quoted in Herschberg, “Outrageous Grace,” 25.

involved in disco music that it brings out the animal in people,” remaining consistent with the animal imagery the press used to define her. Beyond the animal metaphors, Jones openly defended her explicit sexuality in other publications by saying, “Most singers are just singers. I add another dimension to my performance by living the song, acting it out in motion, every drop of it.” Jones believed this acting out of the music garnered the most response from her audience, and she felt no shame in that, telling the *Chicago Tribune*, “There ain’t nothing wrong with sex.”<sup>93</sup> Grace Jones was not a puppet in a producer’s medium; the sexuality of her performances reflected her own understanding of disco culture and sexual expression as something to be celebrated.

Certain feature articles revealed that Grace Jones had a soft side in addition to her aggressively sexual and androgynous one, but Jones was very clear about the fact that her understanding of gender and sexuality was not simple. Some were straightforward about it, saying, “Though her stage persona and chic followers promote a prima donna, surface image, Grace proves to be a surprisingly warm, articulate and open human being—and a sexy woman, too!”<sup>94</sup> Others were more oblique and merely pointed out that in addition to her unconventional stage antics, Grace Jones also fell in love with Goude to the point that she was considering marriage, got pregnant (and cancelled bookings to nurture the pregnancy), and was actually unhappy before finding love with Goude.<sup>95</sup> The latter admission gave Jones a chance to speak about her views of gender roles in the United States. Not only did she express frustration that “it’s very difficult for a female in show business to meet the demands of her professional and personal life at the same time”; she

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<sup>93</sup> Cynthia Raymond, “On the Record,” *Daily News* (New York), 12 March 1978.

<sup>94</sup> Mourges-Rudolph, “Disco’s Grace Jones,” 40. Also see Norment, “Outrageous Grace Jones.”

<sup>95</sup> Wohlfert, Couples, “Grace Jones and Jean-Paul Goude’s Kinky Love Affair”; “Grace Jones Turns Down \$600,000 in Bookings to Have ‘Rhythm Baby,’” *Jet*, 20 September 1979, 47; Haddad, “I Still Lack Love.”

openly complained about what she perceived as backward ideals of gender in the United States. She said that unlike in Europe where men appreciated strong, outgoing women, “A woman who’s different isn’t properly appreciated here. She’s threatening to most men. You should see how some men react when I ask them for a date!”<sup>96</sup> Jones was conscious of the fact that her behavior was not in line with the “traditional” American mainstream, but that did not preclude frustration on her part. For Jones, the ideas of “proper” looks and behavior for women in America were too limited, and that she was working to find success (and love) outside of this ideal was testament to the fact that her androgynous stage image was in line with the beliefs she lived according to day by day.

In defending her androgyny and difference, Grace Jones was able to express her complex opinions about gender. While Jones “assure[d] the world that she is *all woman*, putting to rest rumors that she is a transvestite” by emphatically proclaiming her love for men, in the same statement she explained, “The rumors don’t bother me” because being different was part of being an entertainer.<sup>97</sup> Jones claimed she was comfortable with such rumors because of the nature of her profession, and journalists reported that Jones’s “sexual ambiguity . . . grew out of her initial audience.”<sup>98</sup> But Jones also described her unconventional sexuality as something within herself. Perhaps the most cogent articulation of this idea was in an article for *The Advocate* early in her American career where she explained, “I’m sexy. Not sweet wishy-washy femininity [sic] like that boring Farrah Fawcett or too much of that heavy breathing like Donna Summer. I’m a *woman*, which to me is a combination of male and female. Not feminine, but womanly. And

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<sup>96</sup> Haddad, “I Still Lack Love,” 54.

<sup>97</sup> Norment, “Outrageous Grace Jones,” 92.

<sup>98</sup> Harrington, “Grace on the Cutting Edge.”

vain. And *real*.” She was even certain that because of this womanly sexiness and the glamour it held, she would “appeal to Middle America” because “as long as it’s honest, pure and beautiful, everyone will love it . . . eventually.”<sup>99</sup> What others viewed as extreme and gender-bending was, for Grace Jones, natural and beautiful.<sup>100</sup>

In the end, it was all part of the disco fantasy, and helped make Jones a success, but her image also relied on the fact that she challenged traditional ideas of “proper” femininity, female sexual expression, and beauty. For Jones, this image was just her exercising a commitment to “determined self-expression” that she had developed as a young child.<sup>101</sup> As she once said, “I wanted to use my imagination to create an image that I felt was *me*.”<sup>102</sup> Self-expression and a respect for individual sexual expression had made Jones “a commanding black woman,” which defied historical understanding of a black woman’s place in society.<sup>103</sup> Through such challenges to tradition, Jones garnered attention and controversy, and the confusion surrounding her image meant Grace Jones became a star as a sexually aggressive, androgynous woman, even though some perceived such behaviors as threatening. She could break the bounds of acceptable feminine behavior because the press often described her in a way that took away her

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<sup>99</sup> Jones quoted in Herschberg, “Outrageous Grace,” 26. She puts forth a similar idea in West, “An Interview with Grace Jones,” 27, where she explains that she is made up of multiple characters, one that “is a childlike person with the normal fantasies of romance” and another that “is a creative person working in a masculine way like a man.”

<sup>100</sup> Jones expressed the idea of extreme v. natural in her own words here: “I never meant to be as extreme as people see me. For me, I’ve found my balance, but it seems to be an extreme for others. . . .’ Though people still confound Grace when they tell her the world isn’t ready for her, she has proven her image sells.” See Zweigler, “Keeping up with Grace Jones,” 75. Much of how Jones understood gender came from her interaction with her gay and more feminine twin brother. In seeing how opposite their dispositions were, she believed there had been some sort of mixing of DNA in the womb, making him male but weak and interested in things like crochet and she female but rough and protective of him. See Mourgues-Rudolph, “Disco’s Grace Jones,” 41-42.

<sup>101</sup> Zweigler, “Keeping Up with Grace Jones,” 73.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>103</sup> John Rockwell, “Grace Jones, Cult Darling, Returns, Miming Tableaux of Dominance,” *New York Times*, 26 September 1977.

femininity, even her humanity. But at the same time, in doing so, she offered an alternative image to women who had adopted the ideas of the sexual revolution and sexual freedom as liberation into their lives. She was a disco diva that represented the extreme individuality of what feminism had become as it seeped into the popular.

### **Sister Sledge: A Family Affair**

Yet, disco divas ran the gamut of possibilities when it came to femininity and female sexuality, which helped make the genre complex and appealing to a wide audience. If Labelle was the new model for girl groups, female performers followed it to varying extents depending on genre and assorted production decisions. Not all disco performers had the option to be completely “like what [they] are”—the creative, profit-motivated, energies of their writers and producers taking precedent—but Sister Sledge made conscious decisions to tone down the sexual nature of disco in their image. The only female disco act (beyond Donna Summer) that Gillian Gaar specifically named, in her history of women in rock and roll, as having “manage[d] to transcend disco’s built-in anonymity factor and establish themselves as a recognizable group,” these four sisters represented the opposite extreme of what disco offered in terms of how to understand female sexuality.<sup>104</sup> They did not follow the model of Labelle, instead presenting themselves more as a holdover of the innocent girl group image of the 1960s. With their biggest hit, “We Are Family,” speaking volumes about this family group, Sister Sledge was the disco community’s icon for the values of education, family, and religion, coming off as almost asexual and representing a kind of “traditional” feminine ideal. Disco’s popular reputation may have been that of a sexual and decadent free-for-all, but groups

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<sup>104</sup> Gillian G. Gaar, *She’s a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock and Roll* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1992), 173.

like Sister Sledge illustrate that as a musical genre it actually held room for a wide range of sexual sensibilities and that the concept of individuality could also include the choice for women to remain more conservative in their sexual identities.

Debra, Joni, Kim, and Kathy Sledge, of Philadelphia, came from a very musical family: Mother, Florez Sledge, was a former dancer and singer; Grandmother, Viola Williams, was an accomplished opera singer; and Father, Edwin Sledge, was a member of legendary tap duo “Fred and Sledge.” Flo and Edwin divorced when the girls were young.<sup>105</sup> The sisters honed their performance skills in church and began singing together when they were very young, but they struggled to make a name for themselves in the United States. By 1975, they had become a familiar name on the disco circuit with their single, “Love, Don’t You Go Through No Changes On Me,” hitting number five on *Billboard*’s Disco Action chart and breaking into the Hot 100 at number ninety-two. A second single, “Protect Your Love/Pain Reliever” peaked at number seven on the disco charts later that year, and both critics and fans praised the young sisters for their talent in disco and soul. Like the disco movement itself, this excitement was strongest in the black community and, in at least one case, instigated by the fans themselves. *Soul* magazine did not feature the women until an avid fan wrote in asking, “Why haven’t you done a story on the fabulous Sister Sledge yet?” and went on to describe how popular they were in East Coast clubs. The article that followed described the girls as having “considerable talents,” and other black newspapers and magazines called the group “one of the most promising female groups in the record industry” with “excellent arrangements

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<sup>105</sup> See Louie Robinson, “Sister Sledge: They Really Are Family,” *Ebony*, February 1980 and “History and Bio,” *KathySledge.com*, <http://www.kathysledge.com>.

. . . and excellent singing.”<sup>106</sup> Music industry and general readership newspapers also commended Sister Sledge with *The New York Times* and *Billboard* adding to the acclaim.<sup>107</sup> Despite such positive reviews, breakout success was hard to come by for the Sledge sisters. They released a second album, *Together*, in 1977, but its most popular singles cracked only the bottom of *Billboard*'s R&B charts. They remained on the disco circuit where disco audiences of all sorts enjoyed their performances, but the group received relatively little press in the years before *We Are Family*.<sup>108</sup>

Not until they joined forces with Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers, the backbone of the super-successful disco group Chic, did Sister Sledge hit it big in the mainstream disco market. Originally wanting to become famous rock and roll artists but finding the path blocked in the 1960s by the color of their skin, Edwards and Rodgers went into disco as a medium that would allow them to merge their personal rock influences with more standard R&B rhythms. By 1978, Chic had become one of the most successful disco groups of the era with songs such as “Dance, Dance, Dance,”

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<sup>106</sup> Dennis Plummer, Letters, “Sister Sledge in Soul,” *Soul*, 7 July 1975, 17; Tom Perew, “Sledge Sisters Hammer It In,” *Soul*, 1 September 1975, 13; “Spinners and Sister Sledge at Perv’s,” *Daily Defender*, 9 January 1975; Michael Veny, Album Reviews, *New York Amsterdam News*, 29 March 1975. Also see: Tom Perew, “Sister Sledge: Their ‘Circle of Love’-ing Expands,” *Soul*, 4 August 1975; Hot Singles, Sister Sledge, “Love Ain’t Easy,” *Soul*, 8 December 1975; and Dennis Stovall, Letters, “Sister Sledge For Real?” *Soul*, 29 September 1975.

<sup>107</sup> John Rockwell, Pop Music, “Sweet Soul,” *New York Times*, 22 February 1975; New On The Charts, Sister Sledge, “Love, Don’t You Go Through No Changes On Me,” *Billboard*, 11 January 1975; Top Album Picks, First Time Around, Sister Sledge, *Circle of Love*, *Billboard*, 8 February 1975. One of the only exceptions to Sister Sledge’s positive reception was in Robert Ford Jr.’s review of a 1975 Radio City Music Hall performance. See Robert Ford Jr., Talent in Action, Marvin Gaye, Dramatics, Sister Sledge at Radio City Music Hall, New York, *Billboard*, 25 October 1975, 33.

<sup>108</sup> Dennis Hunt, “Sister Sledge: A Star On the Rise,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 July 1979, describes the rough time Sister Sledge had before their big hit, and the following articles are evidence that the reception of their disco act remained positive even if it was not reflected in record sales: Prentis Rogers, “Sister Sledge: A Composite of Beauty, Brains and Talent,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 5 June 1977; “New Faces: A Guide to the Season’s Young Talent,” *New York Times*, 4 November 1977. The latter article mentions a weekend showing at Starship Discovery in New York City, which attracted a mixed crowd in terms of both race and sexual preference, according to comments by vyniljunkie | Feb 17, 08 and May 7, 08, on “Starship Discovery,” *Disco Music.com*, [http://www.discomusic.com/clubs-more/891\\_0\\_6\\_0\\_C/](http://www.discomusic.com/clubs-more/891_0_6_0_C/).



“Everybody Dance,” and “Le Freak” as well as an image that reflected the desires of an upwardly mobile black middle class by clothing themselves in sophistication and glamour.<sup>109</sup> The slick sounds and production techniques that had brought Rodgers and Edwards such huge success with Chic were also heard in the new sound that Sister Sledge released under their direction, playing a key role in finally bringing Sister Sledge respect and considerable success in the mainstream of disco pop.

Rodgers and Edwards wrote, arranged and conducted each of the songs on *We Are Family*, and almost every critic recognized this contribution as a major factor in the album’s success. *Billboard* predicted (correctly so) that “they [Rodgers and Edwards] may create the same type of hit [as Chic’s ‘Le Freak’] for this female quartet with ‘He’s The Greatest Dancer’” and commented later that “produced by Chic, the heavy bass, funky guitar and pulsating percussion [in “We Are Family] mix clearly in solidifying the group’s technique and style.”<sup>110</sup> Reviews unvaryingly commented on the album’s “tight instrumentation,” “splendid production work,” and “cool arrangements” with “Edwards’ insistently loping, prototypical disco bass line.”<sup>111</sup> The *sound* of R&B disco pioneered by Rodgers and Edwards helped Sister Sledge make it big, but their success also had to do with the impression of critics that the production brought something to disco that moved it beyond the repetitive, mindless, and raunchy disco fare that was saturating the mainstream market. Along with its tight instrumentation, *Billboard* commended “He’s The Greatest Dancer” for featuring “more lyrical content than standard disco fare,” and

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<sup>109</sup> For more on Chic see Daryl Easlea, *Everybody Dance: Chic and the Politics of Disco*, (London: Helter Skelter, 2004) and Shapiro, *Turn the Best Around*, 157-173.

<sup>110</sup> Top Album Picks, Soul, Sister Sledge, *We Are Family*, *Billboard*, 10 February 1979; Top Single Picks, Sister Sledge, “We Are Family,” *Billboard*, 5 May 1979.

<sup>111</sup> Top Single Picks, Sister Sledge, “He’s The Greatest Dancer,” *Billboard*, 13 January 1979; Review of Sister Sledge, “He’s The Greatest Dancer/Somebody Loves Me,” *Black Music & Jazz Review*, March 1979, 34; W. Kim Heron, Pop, “Sister Sledge: From Performing to Producing,” *Chicago Tribune*, 2 August 1981.

Keith Spencer wrote to *Black Stars*, after defending Chic against those who claimed they geared their music to a white audience, saying that “Chic had given disco more versatility and class with their unique sound.”<sup>112</sup> They passed on this versatility and class to Sister Sledge, helping the sisters move from “shabby clubs” to “playing prestigious dates, such as the three-night Universal Amphitheater engagements with headliner Cher” and to be included “among the most sought-after acts in the country.”<sup>113</sup>

When Sister Sledge hit it big under the production of Rodgers and Edwards, the praise was so widespread and all-encompassing it seemed as if the women never had a devoted audience before the collaboration. New fan David E. French even wrote into *Ebony* speaking highly of the group and claiming that “He’s the Greatest Dancer” was “the first cut off the debut album.”<sup>114</sup> *We Are Family* certainly was not Sister Sledge’s debut album, but with the onslaught of disco groups hitting the mainstream post-*Saturday Night Fever* and the opportunity for Sister Sledge to reach an audience beyond the disco-devotees of the mid-seventies with their first album in nearly two years, it must have felt like it to many new converts. Keith Spencer, who had so praised Chic for the refinement they brought to disco, wrote to *Black Stars*, “Unfortunately, I had never heard of Sister Sledge until Chic produced that black oriented album.”<sup>115</sup> The fact that Rodgers and Edwards helped Sister Sledge succeed with a new and innovative sound in the disco genre meant that the group’s post-*Saturday Night Fever* fan base included blacks who had questioned disco in the mainstream as a whitening of black music but respected the

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<sup>112</sup>Top Single Picks, Sister Sledge, “He’s The Greatest Dancer,” *Billboard*, 13 January 1979; Keith Spencer, Letters, *Black Stars*, April 1980, 5. Also see Connie Johnson, Pop Album Briefs, “We Are Family,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 June 1979.

<sup>113</sup> Robinson, “They Really Are Family,” 137; Hunt, “Star on the Rise.”

<sup>114</sup> David E. French, Letters to the Editor, “Sister Sledge,” *Ebony* April 1980, 16.

<sup>115</sup> Keith Spencer, Letters, *Black Stars*, April 1980, 5.

R&B influence that Rodgers and Edwards brought to the genre. Simultaneously, however, Sister Sledge was no longer identifiable without recognition given to Rodgers and Edwards.

Rodgers and Edwards may have been overlords of production when it came to Sister Sledge's albums—one newspaper dubbed them “the Phil Spectors of disco”—but critics still praised the unique vocal talent the sisters contributed to their musical endeavors.<sup>116</sup> A glowing commendation of the vocal and harmonizing abilities of the singers themselves accompanied nearly every acknowledgement of the invaluable production.<sup>117</sup> Critics recognized Sister Sledge as a growing and talented group, and Robert Ford Jr., one of the few who criticized them early on, by 1979, acknowledged them as “rapidly maturing stage performers who seem to be growing into their new-found success.”<sup>118</sup> In this maturity, the sisters also gained praise for their ability to “entertain even when not singing their most familiar material.”<sup>119</sup> Disco was their entry to fame because of its wide appeal, but critics recognized that Sister Sledge held a variety of musical talents. Important to note in all this praise—from their early days to their *We Are Family* renown—is that Sister Sledge found success and acclaim because of their singing abilities rather than sensationalized stage antics like Grace Jones or Labelle.

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<sup>116</sup> Pop Music, “Bee Gees to Summer: A Who’s Who.” One of the few exceptions to the nearly universal praise of *We Are Family* criticized the album on just that issue saying, “this was produced by Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers, the driving force of the current pet disco group, Chic. The unfortunate result is that the sisters become virtually indistinguishable from their mentors.” See People Picks & Pans, “Sister Sledge, *We Are Family*,” *People*, 26 March 1979, 24.

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Top Album Picks, Soul, Sister Sledge, *We Are Family*; Top Single Picks, Sister Sledge, “We Are Family”; Top Album Picks, Pop, Sister Sledge, *Love Somebody Today*, *Billboard*, 23 February 1980; and Top Single Picks, Pop, Sister Sledge, “Got To Love Somebody,” *Billboard*, 22 December 1979.

<sup>118</sup> Robert Ford Jr., Talent in Action, Rick James, Sister Sledge, Felt Forum, New York, *Billboard*, 12 May 1979, 29.

<sup>119</sup> Nelson George, “Forum Entertainment: Betty Wright, Sister Sledge, Instant Funk,” *Billboard*, 24 March 1979, 52.

Even more importantly, Sister Sledge remained happy under the direction of Rodgers and Edwards because their music reflected the values they held as a close-knit, religious family unit. The classy “chic” image of Chic was something that Sister Sledge had promoted all along and even more so as they matured into beautiful women. As Joni Sledge once told the *New York Amsterdam News*, “It’s what we feel and believe in. We just loved everything in the album they wrote for us because it’s just us.”<sup>120</sup> “Just us,” for Sister Sledge, if taken from press on the group, meant being educated, religious, sisters. From the short reviews of their singles and albums in *Billboard* to the brief blurbs in the entertainment section of newspapers like *The New York Times* or *Los Angeles Times* and especially in the feature-length articles in the black press, nearly every article written on the sisters did not just mention but elaborated on, and played up in various combinations, these three values of education, religion, and family. Thanks to the articles written about Sister Sledge, their fans were well aware that they were “four genuine sisters” “raised on church singing”; each sister attended and eventually graduated from Temple University with specific and unique majors that offered them options just in case the music business did not work out; their mother and grandmother had histories in the music profession and served as inspiration; they prayed before every concert and fasted for deals and contracts; and “they like[d] to party, too—but not excessively” because they “shunn[ed] cigarettes and strong drinks.”<sup>121</sup> These facts inspired fans to write in and

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<sup>120</sup> Joni Sledge quoted in Marie Moore, “Sister Sledge. . . ‘Are Family’,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 May 1979. Kim Sledge went on to explain how before Rodgers and Edwards, they had turned down or changed songs that had content about which they were not comfortable singing.

<sup>121</sup> Quoted phrases taken from New on the Charts, Sister Sledge, “Love, Don’t You Go Through No Changes On Me,” *Billboard*, 11 January 1975, 16; “Sledge Sisters Tell Why They Have ‘Prayer-Fasts,’” *Jet*, 31 May 1979, 57; and Major Robinson, “Sister Sledge,” *Sepia*, June 1979, 73. For select other articles that deal with the education, religion, and family background of Sister Sledge see: Perew, “Their ‘Circle of Love’-ing Expands”; Rogers, “Composite of Beauty, Brains and Talent” ; “Sister Sledge: More than

express their admiration of “the strong family bonds” and “that Sister Sledge has decided on combining a college education with their professional careers” as well as pleasure in “see[ing] ‘youth’ progressing in the right direction.”<sup>122</sup> The Sledge sisters were vocally talented, but the way their music reflected their wholesome lifestyle also appealed to a black population still struggling to gain respect for its family life in a white mainstream that often imagined black women as domineering matriarchs or promiscuous young women plagued by unwanted pregnancies and poverty—both communities conflicted about the effects of a permissive society.

Most prominent in Sister Sledge’s trifecta of admirable qualities was that of family, both of blood and of mankind. Family togetherness was “the keynote of the group,” a source of pride for the sisters themselves, something acknowledged by journalists and admired by their fans.<sup>123</sup> Kim Sledge explained to *Black Stars* that the sisters liked their group name because it emphasized their togetherness, and the magazine quoted the sisters talking about their strong bonds and how their mother and grandmother traveled with them.<sup>124</sup> The oldest sister, Carol, normally not part of the singing quartet, would even sometimes take Debbie’s place while she was out on maternity leave.<sup>125</sup> Beyond their personal family ties, Sister Sledge encouraged the idea of the universal family of man and found pleasure “trying to advocate family unity and togetherness” by encouraging audiences to hold hands while singing their hit song, “We Are Family”—the

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Bubblegum,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 18 June 1977; “New Faces: A Guide to the Season’s Young Talent,” *New York Times*, 4 November 1977; Hunt, “A Star On the Rise”; and “Sister Sledge is a Family Affair,” *Record World*, 8 March 1980.

<sup>122</sup> Dorothea H. Ellis, *Black Stars Letters*, “Sister Sledge,” *Black Stars*, August 1979, 4; Jerry L. Baker, *Readers Rap*, “Sister Sledge,” *Jet*, 5 July 1979, 4.

<sup>123</sup> “Sister Sledge: More than Bubblegum,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 18 June 1977.

<sup>124</sup> “Sister Sledge: The Family is Back,” *Black Stars*, June 1979, 42.

<sup>125</sup> “Sister Sledge is a Family Affair,” *Record World*, 8 March 1980, 23.

song by which they hoped to be remembered.<sup>126</sup> Their fans, even as early as 1975, voiced their appreciation for the love the sisters held both among themselves and for their fans, and predicted that their “family unity and love will keep them together” and that “We Are Family” “will be remembered and sung by millions in the years to come simply because it related to the family unit.” Such an admirable source of strength and talent meant that, according to their fans, Sister Sledge had “earned” and “deserved” the attention and popularity they were getting in the disco explosion.<sup>127</sup> A focus on family and the fact that Sister Sledge gained popularity in part because of this quality is evidence that disco, even at its height of commercial popularity, could be about more than just raunchy sex and finding individual pleasures.

In correlating themselves so strongly with family togetherness, the image of Sister Sledge reinforced the “traditional” association of family with women and femininity and aligned itself with a more conservative idea of what it meant to be female in American society, ideas still supported by many black women looking to boost the respect of the black family. Journalists reinforced the group’s association with family and domesticity by pointing out such conventionally feminine activities as Debbie going on maternity leave and later including pictures to explain how she brought her young daughters on the road when the group traveled. An article in *Black Stars* included photos of the girls in church, Kathy in the kitchen, and Joni vacuuming. A *Jet* article on the prayer-fasts of the group mentioned the superfluous fact that Kathy and Joni were the two unmarried sisters,

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<sup>126</sup> Moore, “Sister Sledge. . . ‘Are Family’”; Robinson, “They Really Are Family,” 138, 140; “Real Family, Sister Sledge, Comes to Town,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 April 1980; Jay Merritt, “Sister Sledge: The Rise of a Funky Family,” *Rolling Stone*, 12 July 1979, 18.

<sup>127</sup> Dennis Stovall, Letters, “Sister Sledge For Real?,” *Soul*, 29 September 1975; Vanessa Hardy, Black Stars Letters, “Sister Sledge,” *Black Stars*, August 1979; David E. French, Letters to the Editor, “Sister Sledge,” *Ebony* April 1980; William Gaddy, Jr., Black Stars Letters, “Sister Sledge,” *Black Stars*, August 1979; Dorothea H. Ellis, Black Stars Letters, “Sister Sledge,” *Black Stars*, August 1979, 4.

and a later one provided a focused look at the married life of three of the four sisters. In a *Los Angeles Times* article, it was pointed out that Joni became much more animated when talking about the pitfalls of trying to find and maintain a romantic relationship when one is part of a successful singing group.<sup>128</sup> Unlike Grace Jones, for whom the occasional discussion of relationships or troubled search for love because of a professional career was meant to soften a hard and raunchy image, with Sister Sledge the same discussions were used to amplify an already strong feminine association with family or to explain away why such seemingly “traditional” women were not yet married. The image projected by and for Sister Sledge correlated with a long history of women supposedly being moral and domestic, in need of a relationship to be considered whole. Moreover, it is significant that in the case of Sister Sledge discussions of religion, education, and family were punctuated with references to romance or marriage, not sex or sexuality, showing that they were not looking to step outside of their role as submissive women by being aggressive about their sexual preferences. That they maintained this image within a society inundated with ideas of sexual liberation and a musical genre many believed to be the clarion call for such liberation shows disco’s penchant for individuality and choice.

Some of the lyrics Rodgers and Edwards wrote for them were less than innocent and there was a certain sexiness to the Sledge sisters, but their wholesome and moral image overpowered any reference to sex or sexuality. From their early career on the disco circuit, Sister Sledge seemed to draw more from girl groups of the past like the Supremes than the new model provided by Labelle. They may have worn coordinating

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<sup>128</sup> Hunt, “A Star On the Rise” and Ford., *Talent in Action*, Rick James, Sister Sledge, Felt Forum, New York; “Sister Sledge: The Family is Back,” *Black Stars*, June 1979, 45; Robinson, “They Really Are Family,” 138; “Sledge Sisters Tell Why They Have ‘Prayer-Fasts’,” *Jet*, 31 May 1979; Ken Smikle, “Sister Sledge: Women with an Eye on the Future,” *Essence*, July 1981, 14 and esp. 17.

trousers and blouses on *Soul Train* instead of ballgowns, but they certainly did not veer into the futuristic costumes of Labelle, nor did they put on a freeform performance. A *New York Times* review commented on how “the choreographed movement looks a little self-conscious, the ballad excursions are sometimes a little corny.”<sup>129</sup> When Sister Sledge gained the spotlight with *We Are Family*, they maintained much of this original-girl-group style. Kathy Sledge once admitted to *Rolling Stone* that in searching for a new image, the group became even more of a disco act, “Not as far as our singing, but the way we dress. It’s flashier and maybe a little sexier.” But not only was this admission and the correlating realization that they were something of a commodity in the giant disco industry countered by the explanation that their message “has always been love—family and unity”; in the grand scheme of things, relative to other disco performers, their look was far from distasteful or explicitly sexual.<sup>130</sup> Their costumes—at least the ones that appeared in publicity shots—remained coordinated with each other and included ample skin coverage.<sup>131</sup> Sister Sledge posed for a widely circulated group photo in which the sisters appeared with uniquely braided hair and bare shoulders that might suggest nudity below the line of the photo and that one magazine writer specifically described as “sexy.” But considering the reputation of the group outside of the photo studio, it is unlikely that disco denizens would have found it particularly racy.<sup>132</sup> Journalists sometimes tried to claim a certain amount of sex-appeal for the Sledge sisters, but these descriptions could not compare to the overwhelming ideas of religion and wholesomeness that otherwise

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<sup>129</sup> Rockwell, Pop Music, “Sweet Soul,” 56.

<sup>130</sup> Merritt, “Rise of a Funky Family,” 18.

<sup>131</sup> In fact, compared to costumes they wore in their early disco days, which sometimes consisted of low-cut V-necks and bare midriffs on the teenage girls, the costumes in which they were photographed as young adults during the height of *We Are Family* were comparatively tame. Compare photographs in *We Are Family*, compact disc (Los Angeles: Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1995), R2 71587.

<sup>132</sup> Robinson, “Sister Sledge,” 71.



pervaded their image. Moreover, the few comments of such nature that appeared did so after Sister Sledge had separated from Rodgers and Edwards, deciding to move more in a rock 'n' roll direction.<sup>133</sup>

During the height of their disco fame, however, if their image had not already been so strongly associated with wholesomeness and girl-group innocence, listeners could have easily construed the lyrics of “He’s the Greatest Dancer” as correlating with the sexual liberation of women and disco’s reputation as a site of sexual liberality. Not only did Kathy Sledge, in singing about a quintessential discotheque experience, beg the protagonist of the song to “please take me home”; she objectified the man in this song, adoring him because of his sexy clothes, demeanor and dancing ability. In doing so, she made this “greatest dancer” yet another example of disco making dance and fashion—historically feminine interests—masculine and sexy.<sup>134</sup> Despite these lyrical representations of the liberating impulses of the 1970s, Sister Sledge’s wholesome image, combined with the masterful vocal and production work, likely made the subject matter “almost entirely secondary” or the lyrics interpreted as reflecting merely a “teen-age romantic theme,” as one review phrased it.<sup>135</sup> At best, Sister Sledge likely emoted “an

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<sup>133</sup> Examples of the sex appeal of Sister Sledge can be found in Mike Joyce, “Slinky Sister Sledge,” *Washington Post*, 23 May 1981 and Maria Riccardi, “5 Singers, One Soul: Seductive Sister Sledge,” *Washington Post*, 6 August 1981. The latter is most explicit in its correlation of Sister Sledge with sexuality, claiming they “dressed in vampy black jumpsuits and boots, project power and seduction” and that in a concert they “rubbed their bodies suggestively against male members of the audience.” However, in these same three paragraphs, the author talked about how after the performance they put on jeans and sweaters, “sit shyly” and “giggle nervously.” She concluded with the statement, “Sure, it’s sex on stage, but at home they’re Christians.”

<sup>134</sup> Lyrics by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, performed by Sister Sledge, “He’s the Greatest Dancer,” *We Are Family*, compact disc (1979, Los Angeles: Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1995), R2 71587. There actually was argument between Nile Rodgers and the Sledge sisters about singing that particular line, as recounted by Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 170.

<sup>135</sup> Review of Sister Sledge, “He’s The Greatest Dancer/Somebody Loves Me,” *Black Music & Jazz Review*, March 1979, 34; “Pop Music: Bee Gees to Summer: A Who’s Who,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June 1979.

innocent sensuality” for people to comment on or lust after if wanted, but most chose to bypass the Sledges’ sexuality in favor of their talent and values of unity and love.<sup>136</sup>

Sister Sledge earned only mid-range success with their follow up album with Rodgers and Edwards, and garnered similar results when they ventured into danceable rock territory under the production of Narada Michael Walden and eventually self-production. They never again enjoyed the same high-profile success they had with the perfect timing of the disco beat and inspirational message of “We Are Family.” Their lyrics ventured into the more sexually suggestive realm beginning with some of the songs on 1980’s *Love Somebody Today* and 1981’s *All American Girls*, perhaps as an attempt to fit more into the rock paradigm or, considering some of the sisters shared writing credits on half the latter album’s songs, a reflection of the more mature women coming to understand their own sexuality more fully. Their overall image as talented wholesome sisters remained constant.<sup>137</sup>

It is no wonder Sister Sledge ultimately had more successful crossover hits than someone like Grace Jones. Beyond the perfect timing of their biggest hits with disco’s massive explosion after *Saturday Night Fever*, the Sledge sisters were disco divas who aligned themselves with more of a “good girl” image of femininity and female sexuality. They were less threatening to a society still struggling with male sexual privilege and its understanding of “proper” gender roles, and their wholesome image more readily

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<sup>136</sup> “an innocent sensuality” quoted from Johnson, Pop Album Briefs, “We Are Family.”

<sup>137</sup> A sample of articles on the group in the early 1980s: Jean Williams, “Sister Sledge: Group Drops ‘Chic Formula’ For New Rockish Direction,” *Billboard*, 4 October 1980; Top Album Picks, Soul, Sister Sledge, *All American Girls*, *Billboard*, 14 February 1981; Paul Grein, “Sister Sledge Takes Up Rock,” *Los Angeles Times*, 26 April 1981; Joyce, “Slinky Sister Sledge”; Lynn Van Matre, “Sledge Drive It Home: They’re No One-Note Affair,” *Chicago Tribune*, 12 June 1981; W. Kim Heron, Pop, “Sister Sledge: From Performing to Producing,” *Chicago Tribune*, 2 August 1981; J. D. Considine, Review of Sister Sledge, *The Sisters*, *Rolling Stone*, 15 April 1982.

acknowledged the conflicted nature by which middle-class black women approached feminism and sexual liberation. If Jones was the disco embodiment of radical feminist ideas of liberated sexuality and challenges to these gender roles, then Sister Sledge was the disco equivalent of women (feminist or not) who wished to find happiness and success on more “traditionally” feminine terms and chose to downplay the role of sexuality in female liberation. The image projected by and for Sister Sledge as a group of educated, religious, and strongly bonded sisters promoting a message of universal love offered disco audiences something more substantial than just another girl group that made it big singing “ooh, baby I love you so,” but neither were they another over-produced stereotype of the sexually voracious black female. Rather, Sister Sledge offered black women an image of success without having to give up education, religion, family, or a commitment to conservative sexual expression. The fact that Sister Sledge’s biggest hits occurred in the genre of disco proves that women did not have to sell themselves in a sexual sense or even necessarily come off as sexually liberated in order to make it big in the disco scene. They could choose to be sexually restrained and still be respected and enjoy the fruits of the disco phenomenon. That disco could encompass a variety of sexual proclivities shows that, for many people, it probably was just about dancing, but it also represented the concept of individuality that had so permeated both American and feminist thought in the late 1970s.

### **The Complicated Relationship of Disco and Feminism**

The performers discussed above illustrate how expressions of sexuality had become important to a female sense of identity in the 1970s, but that such an identity was decidedly individualistic and influenced by various tensions within larger society. That

groups like Sister Sledge and Labelle could both find popularity with a mainstream audience in the same musical genre suggests to what extent disco spoke to the influence of self-definition that movements like women's liberation had fostered. Disco divas became a cultural expression of women's liberation and its redefinition of the sexual revolution to include female sexual self-determination. But the often undisclosed or underappreciated relationship to the feminist movement claimed by disco divas shows just how much the movement had influenced everyday understandings of womanhood. It reflects the ways in which many women had come to internalize the tenets of the movement without taking an avowedly political stance and speaks well to the ways in which feminism had become constituted in and of popular culture, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation.

Taken together, acts from Labelle to Sister Sledge served as a popular culture representation of what feminism had become in the late 1970s—an imprecise, fractured movement in support of the advancement of women as a group, but increasingly focused on the valorization of individual achievements and personal choices. The feminist movement appropriated “We Are Family” (as did a myriad other groups from gay rights and the NAACP to the Pittsburgh Pirates) as a celebration of sisterhood: “Sister Sledge (four actual blood siblings from Philadelphia) sing out a rousing anthem that applies equally well to inspirational sisters,” said *Ms.* magazine.<sup>138</sup> The same article, in pointing out that “women in this field [disco] . . . more frequently than not pay at least token lip service to feminist ideals,” described Gloria Gaynor’s hit “I Will Survive”—a strong declaration of female independence and individual courage—as “second only to Famous

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<sup>138</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 171; Cheren, *Keep on Dancin'*, 255; Pamela Brandt, “At the Top of the Charts...But Are They Playing Our Song?” *Ms.*, November 1979, 42.

Amos chocolate-chip cookies and a glass of warm milk as indispensable first-aid for broken hearts that beat four-to-the-bar.”<sup>139</sup> Climbing the charts at the same time, the two disco anthems represented distinct yet complementary visions of what second-wave feminism aspired to—sisterhood v. individual strength and independence. Moreover, the feminist associations of these songs showed how these women could align themselves with certain feminist ideals even while choosing not to flaunt sexual liberation through their image or music. And in making people like Labelle and Grace Jones stars in many ways because of their free sexual expression, disco music also helped cultivate the near-obsession with sex and sexuality of modern popular culture, a necessary precursor to Third Wave feminism’s rooting of itself inside this commodified sexuality.

*Ms.* also pointed out, “Probably the most significant revolution is in the area of musical control. More women are writing or choosing their own material, arranging their own charts, and producing their own records. But especially, they are playing their own instruments.”<sup>140</sup> While the majority of disco divas did not play instruments, Hazel Payne and Janice Johnson made a clear statement about women’s abilities by fronting the disco group A Taste of Honey, playing guitar and bass, respectively. A Taste of Honey gained fame with their number one single, “Boogie Oogie Oogie,” in mid-1978, but audiences were often reluctant to believe that two women were actually playing the guitars.<sup>141</sup> The press that appeared on them was quick to point out that the women did play their own instruments in addition to composing and arranging their own material. And Payne and Johnson were outspoken about the fact that they could be strong and feminine at the same

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<sup>139</sup> Brandt, “At the Top of the Charts,” 42.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>141</sup> Dennis Hunt, “Sticky Patch Over for Taste of Honey,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 August 1978.

time: “‘Men still look at us as if we’re the weaker sex,’ Johnson observed, ‘and some men still take us lightly because we’re women. Who needs that? We’re really two things—strong and feminine. It takes strength to do what we’re doing in this male-dominated business.’”<sup>142</sup> Playing the guitar, considered a “masculine” instrument by most, was something that Payne and Johnson proved could be done while maintaining a commitment to femininity. Whether or not the lyrics of their music were sending a message more profound than have fun and boogie, the women of A Taste of Honey were sending a message that women could be both strong and feminine while taking on actions traditionally relegated only to men—and do them well.

A number of disco divas and the music they performed provide ample evidence of mainstream disco’s ability to spread social messages and reflect feminist ideals. One example of a disco song that spoke to feminist ideas by conveying the positive aspects of female independence from men was Candi Staton’s 1976 hit “Young Hearts Run Free,” which spent sixteen weeks on the *Billboard* Hot 100, peaking at number twenty, and reached number eight on the disco charts, staying on the chart for nearly seven months. The song, which included such lyrics as “What’s the sense in sharing, this one and only life/Endin’ up, just another lost and lonely wife”; “My mind must be free, to learn all I can about me”; and “young hearts, to yourself be true,” served as “a married woman’s warning to young single women about the dangers of premature or unhealthy marital moves.”<sup>143</sup> The singer described the song as being about her own life, trying to get out of

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<sup>142</sup> Dennis Hunt, “Taste of Honey: Sweet Strong,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 1981; Stan West, “A Taste of Honey: Liberated and Loving Every Minute of It,” *Soul*, October 1980, 14.

<sup>143</sup> Lyrics by Dave Crawford, performed by Candi Staton, “Young Hearts Run Free,” *Candi Staton: 2 Classic Albums on 1 CD: Young Hearts Run Free/House of Love*, compact disc (1976, New York: Spy Records, 2002), SPY 46002-2; Robert Hilburn, “Disco Balance by Candi Staton,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July 1976.

a marriage with an abusive husband, and it was a clear expression of women's needs to define themselves as individuals rather than through a relationship with a man. Staton was also a feminist role model balancing career with caring for five children.<sup>144</sup> Staton's was an early example of disco's possibility for feminist commentary, but disco continued to speak to feminist ideas of strong, independent women even at its most commercial. The Ritchie Family, for example, saw "disco with a touch of social message" in their 1977 album *African Queens*, which paid tribute (albeit a splashy tribute with rhinestones and feathers) to historically significant African women through the visual depiction and lyrical celebration of three queens of Africa—Cleopatra, Nefertiti, and the Queen of Sheba. The group members claimed they "didn't set out to make a 'feminist' statement, [but] all have found admirable traits in the characters they represent."<sup>145</sup>

Despite these debts to and reflections of the larger feminist movement, most disco divas chose not to label themselves as feminists. We do not know if Gloria Gaynor or the women of Sister Sledge considered themselves feminists; neither made a statement one way or the other. Dennis Hunt, music writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, received "I Will Survive" as "an uplifting declaration of independence and strength by a rejected woman, set to a sizzling disco beat," and Gloria Gaynor talked about how she may not have written it, but it reflected of her life and proved how disco music could have meaningful lyrics that bring people a positive message of motivation.<sup>146</sup> The journalists who wrote

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<sup>144</sup> Discoguy interview of "Candi Staton," *Disco-Disco.com*, <http://www.disco-disco.com/artists/candi.shtml>; Ken Murray, "Candi quit the nursing game when she got the singing fever," *Soul*, 11 October 1976.

<sup>145</sup> James M. Saslow, "The New African Queens: The Ritchie Family," *The Advocate*, 16 November 1977, 33, 34.

<sup>146</sup> Dennis Hunt, "Gaynor Back in Spotlight with 'Tracks'," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 March 1979. Also see Marc Shapiro, "Gloria Gaynor: Her Disco Says Something!" *Soul*, 14 May 1979; Frederick Douglas Murphy, "Gloria Gaynor: 'I Will Survive'," *Black Stars*, September 1979; Craig Reed, "Gloria Gaynor:

about Sister Sledge may have sought to highlight aspects that could undermine feminist intentions—marriage, motherhood, domesticity, and a commitment to family—but that does not tell us what the sisters themselves believed. Certainly, they would not have disputed a woman’s right to education, to a career, or to respect. And one of their most successful singles following “We Are Family” was “All American Girls,” co-written by Joni Sledge and described by *Rolling Stone* as “a pop-funk chant with a feminist slant that equates Americanism with equal opportunity for women and blacks.”<sup>147</sup> Yet, these disco divas never declared a specific allegiance to or rejection of the feminist movement. Even Grace Jones, who clearly voiced opinions that closely matched radical feminist mantras, never used the word to describe herself.

Other disco divas were less oblique and readily denied any association with the movement despite the fact that their music was markedly feminist. Members of Labelle, who created music described as “revolutionary . . . heavily political, with a distinctly feminist cast,” claimed no commitment to the feminist movement.<sup>148</sup> Patti Labelle said, “I’m not political at all . . . There’s social comment in our song, sure, . . . but we’re just saying what it is. I’m not into the feminist movement as far as joining an organization, either. Women should get equal treatment for equal ability, but I’m not one for marching or joining up.” Nona Hendryx echoed her statements.<sup>149</sup> Though they expressed frustration that they were not getting the credit they deserved in a male-dominated music business, these women chose not to claim membership in the movement that would be

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Disco Queen,” *Sepia*, September 1979; Lynn Van Matre, “Disco: Two Queens of Song,” *Chicago Tribune*, 16 September 1979; and Aaron Fuchs, “Disco Women: They Will Survive,” *Village Voice*, 19 March 1979.

<sup>147</sup> Don Shewey, Review of Sister Sledge *All American Girls*, *Rolling Stone*, 25 June 1981, 53.

<sup>148</sup> Whitmore, “Labelle,” 25.

<sup>149</sup> Salvo, “Sexiest Singers in Show Business,” 48; Johnson, “Going Beyond ‘Oh, Baby, I Love You So’,” 4; Connie Johnson, “Nona Hendryx Doesn’t Live in the Past,” *Black Stars*, October 1979, 33-4.



the driving force behind them finding that recognition. The women of A Taste of Honey also flatly denied any attachment to feminism. Janice Johnson made this very clear in the *Los Angeles Times*: “‘We’re not women’s libbers,’ she said very sternly. ‘We’re not into politics. We’re not trying to help the women’s lib movement. We’re just making music. Politics and our kind of music don’t mix. You turn some people off when you do that. We’re just starting in the record business and we don’t want to turn anybody off.’”<sup>150</sup> Using the derogatory term “women’s libber,” which had come into common parlance at the time, Janice Johnson reveals how the media attacks on feminism had made their way into her mindset and influenced her perception of the movement. These divas illustrated through their careers that they supported the ideals of feminism, but the negative portrayals of the movement in the media meant that they wanted nothing to do with the formal movement itself. Instead, disco became a cultural form through which these women expressed their empowerment and commitment to feminist ideals.

They were feminists without needing to call themselves such, and their cultural products were feminist in nature without having to be about formal political activism. Being in a business predicated on sales and appealing to a wide audience prevented them from aligning themselves with a controversial political movement but did not stop them from obliquely defending its tenets through lyrics and performance. Like so many women who, by the late 1970s, claimed the phrase, “I’m not a feminist, but . . .,” disco divas had allowed the feminist movement to color their careers and performances but were turned off by the backlash against the movement to the extent that aligning

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<sup>150</sup> Hunt, “Sticky Patch Over.” This is a reiteration of a similar statement earlier in the same article. Stan West, “Liberated and Loving Every Minute,” 14, talks about while their song “Good-Bye Baby” could very well be embraced by the feminist movement as a song in support of women standing up to unworthy men, and Johnson welcomed this support, she “refused on several occasions to speak publicly to that group.”

themselves with it was considered dangerous. Both women's liberation and sexual liberation experienced backlashes by the latter part of the 1970s, as conservatism emerged as the dominant force in American life, televangelist Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority, and the New Right became an organized entity, increasing its efforts to repeal *Roe v. Wade* and restore a stable family life to the nation.<sup>151</sup> Americans did not stop having casual sex; women did not return to the traditional confines of the home. But females were less likely to claim a public devotion to the feminist movement. Moreover, in their fight against racist oppression, black women and men found solidarity with each other, and many black women felt alienated by the separatist strands of a feminist movement that was already portrayed in the media as man-hating. Many black women feared that devoting themselves to a movement focused solely on gender oppression would take energy away from their movement against racial oppression, in part by causing further rifts in gender relations. Such conflicted engagement with the feminist movement meant that disco divas could use their music and performances to work through their opinions on the matter without hurting their profit margins by directly claiming that identity.

Indeed, working within a genre that appealed to a wide demographic pool and in which women of all races participated, these popular culture feminists created feminist politics that were increasingly cross-racial. Not all disco divas were black; white women

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<sup>151</sup> For more on the conservative turn in American history see Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2001). William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996) and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) trace the origins of this shift to the 1950s and 60s. For more on the backlash against feminism see Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000) and Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).

such as Andrea True, France Joli, Cher, and Barbra Streisand all found hits with the disco format and projected similar messages of individuality, self-awareness, and sexual pleasure for women. In doing so, they provided a counterpoint to the white female singer-songwriters of the early 1970s and illustrated the ways in which the sexual revolution had broken down some barriers of sexual representation in popular culture that had most often projected white women as “pure” and black women as “depraved.” Yet, that the majority of these divas were black, and their music consumed by blacks as well as whites, is significant because of how they helped attract black women to a feminist cause that would not come to full flower in more activist and academic circles until the 1980s. They aided in the creation of a mainstream feminism that perhaps conflated sexual and women’s liberation, but also dealt with the tensions and confusions of these different forms of liberation for different women and made mainstream feminism one in which black and white women could work through those tensions across racial bounds. Together, these musical-women-cum-feminist-icons helped make a certain form of feminism—one redefined through and meant to work within a commercialized culture—popular among a broad swath of women.

This form of feminism without being feminist becomes especially important and complicated when thinking about disco’s relation with sexual liberation and female sexual expression. Disco music became the voice of these complications, allowing different women to interpret individually the role of sexual liberation in their lives by being a genre open to a wide variety of sexual expression on the part of disco divas. As a musical category that found room for a spectrum of sexual possibilities for women, disco gave voice to women in popular music that up until that time had been lacking. By

representing female sexuality in ways that both challenged and reinforced “traditional” understandings of passive women devoted to men, disco divas reflected the tensions and uncertainties of larger society and appealed to a broad swath of female sensibilities, which helps explain its massive popularity. Disco allowed women to be sexual subjects even if they also remained sexual objects in the eyes of men, and the dominance of divas in a genre that had taken over the pop charts made disco a threatening development to the men who had become accustomed to leading.

## Chapter 6

### **The Queen of Disco: Donna Summer and Female Sexuality**

The year was 1975. The setting, a recording studio in Munich, Germany. Music producer Giorgio Moroder had thrown everyone out of the studio except for himself and a soon-to-be disco diva who proved somewhat timid in singing a song of her own creation. Moroder dimmed the lights in an attempt to “set the mood,” and Donna Summer finally loosened up enough to “ooh” and “aah” her way through a song that would catapult her to the top of the American charts. The song was “Love to Love You Baby.” It started out as a three-minute single, but was soon lengthened to a “17-minute vinyl aphrodisiac” at the insistence of Neil Bogart, president of Casablanca Records. Little more than a haunting instrumental track covered over with Summer repeating the title multiple times in a high, whispery vocal, accented with just as many erotic moans and groans, *Time* magazine (in)famously described the song as a “marathon of 22 orgasms.” It became an instant hit in the clubs because of its danceable beat, and Bogart managed its crossover to radio by convincing stations to play it at midnight, billing it as “seventeen minutes of love with Donna Summer.” By the time Summer returned to the states, after eight years of living and performing in Europe, the image of sex goddess was already made for her, and it was one she would embrace at varying levels over time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Accounts of how Summer recorded “Love to Love You Baby” vary, but a majority of articles written on the star recounted the story. What I present here combines information from multiple sources, reflecting those elements that appear most often: Giorgio Moroder, interview by Jasen Emmons, transcription, Experience Music Project (Seattle), 19 October 2002; Joyce Bogart Trabulus, interview by Jasen Emmons, transcription, Experience Music Project (Seattle), 19 October 2002; Richard Cromelin, “Donna Summer: Love on the Road,” *Rolling Stone*, 25 March 1976; Jim Haskins and J.M. Stifle, *Donna Summer: An*

The image also launched an incredibly successful career. Between 1975 and the end of 1980, Donna Summer released nine gold or platinum albums, placed ten dance hits in the *Billboard* top five, won two Grammy Awards and recorded an Academy Award-winning song.<sup>2</sup> Within that same timeframe, she became one of disco's best-known personalities, transitioned from disco to rock, and embraced born-again Christianity. The public image of Donna Summer seemed to evolve over time from objectified sex goddess to respectful (and respected) musical diva. This linear progression, however, fails to take into account the true complexity of Summer's life and career. During the five years that Summer reigned as "Queen of Disco," she put forth a collection of often-contradictory representations of women, of blackness, and of herself as an African-American woman.<sup>3</sup> The larger roster of female disco stars presented a mosaic of possibilities for femininity and sexual expression—from the aggressive sexuality and androgyny of Grace Jones to the innocence and fun of Sister Sledge—but the variety of sexualities that these women together put forth is also found in the single entity of Donna Summer over the course of her disco career. Because of her multifaceted sexual identities, Donna Summer makes

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*Unauthorized Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, Co., 1983), 44-52, 57-62; Donna Summer with Marc Eliot, *Ordinary Girl: The Journey* (New York: Villard, 2003), 108-112; and Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 173. Quotations taken, respectively, from "Sex Rock," *Time*, 29 December 1975, 39 and Mikal Gilmore, "Donna Summer: Is There Life after Disco?" *Rolling Stone*, 23 March 1978. According to most accounts, "Love to Love You Baby" was, in fact, Summer's idea: inspired by Jane Birkin's European hit "Je T'Aime," she wrote the oft-repeated line and presented it to Moroder, suggesting she make a sexy record as well.

<sup>2</sup> Certification information taken from Gold and Platinum searchable database on Record Industry Association of America (RIAA) website, <http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinum.php>.

<sup>3</sup> Both the amount of time that Summer was at the top of the disco scene and the title "Queen of Disco" are somewhat debatable. Her first U.S. top-ten single, "Love to Love You Baby," was released in late 1975 and hit the top of the charts in early 1976. She continued to release hit singles and albums (although to varying degrees) on a regular basis until the mid-1980s. There is also the complicated issue of the disco backlash – how to define when disco "died" and how Summer's music fits into this decline. Moreover, Gloria Gaynor was crowned "Queen of the Discos" in March 1975, at New York disco, Le Jardin, after her single "Never Can Say Goodbye" became a hit in the clubs, and her 1979 single, "I Will Survive," has become almost synonymous with disco itself. Consequently, disco-oriented circles still debate the identity of the true "Queen of Disco" to this day.

for a wonderful case study in exploring the complex relationship between disco and understandings of female sexuality in the 1970s.

Moreover, Summer is an exceptional disco star because of the extensive role she played in the creative process. Being a performer of Eurodisco, she released songs that were highly stylized and lavishly produced, but they were not completely out of her control. She played a role in writing many of her songs, helped design the cover art for her albums, and had a strong and respectful relationship with her producers.<sup>4</sup> Summer would continue to expand her role in later musical productions, and with a slew of hit records and successful concert tours, would move beyond the one-hit-wonderdom and faceless musical art that befell most disco performers. But no matter what control she had over her career and her image, she could never fully control how her audience consumed her material. Whether singing songs she wrote herself or those written for her, whether or not they reflected her personal views, Summer chose to depict the characters and to identify herself with the songs and their corresponding messages of femininity and sexuality.<sup>5</sup> She could attempt to “set the record straight” and reveal the “real” Donna Summer in the interviews she gave, insisting that reality could not live up to fantasy, but her audience was quick to conflate the image and the person. Some fans would have seen her image as a representation of female self-determination; others would have consumed her work as stimulating images of a repressed female object and prop to male-dominated society. Some may have been able to see both.

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<sup>4</sup> Charles L. Sanders, “Donna Summer,” *Ebony*, October 1977, 42. Among the CDs I have seen that include such credits, Summer designed the album art concept for *Four Seasons of Love*, compact disc (New York: Polygram Records, 1976), Casablanca Records and Filmworks, 826 236-2; and, later, *Bad Girls*, compact disc (New York: Polygram Records, 1979), Casablanca Records and Filmworks, 822 557-2 M-1.

<sup>5</sup> Summer says in her autobiography, *Ordinary Girl*, that she approached all her music as an actress interpreting a character (102).

In the following pages, I examine a specific performer who was one of the most recognized and celebrated disco stars, focusing on the portion of Donna Summer's career that corresponds most directly with the growth and height of disco in the American mainstream—from the success of “Love to Love You Baby” through her break with Casablanca Records and definitive shift to rock with the Geffen Records release of *The Wanderer* in 1980. At a moment in American history when ideas of feminism and sexual liberation were becoming increasingly fractured, Donna Summer offered multiple images of female sexuality, which would appeal to a variety of sensibilities and helps to explain her dominance of the musical charts and the unusual longevity of her popularity.

### **Embracing Sexual Agency: 1975-1977**

The sexual revolution and new realms of sexual expression amounted to an arena that was simultaneously empowering and oppressive for women in the 1970s. Nonetheless, no matter its stance on and uncertainties about the sexual revolution, second-wave feminism and its ideas of “the personal is political” had an enormous effect on sexual expression for women in the 1970s and beyond. No longer was it an ostracizeable offense for a woman to have sex before marriage or to be forthright about her own sexual pleasure with a man or another woman. As individual women of varying races, ethnicities, and classes took these notions and adapted them to their own needs, ideas of female sexuality, self-determination, and agency became increasingly fragmented throughout the disco era. Donna Summer's representations of female sexuality could be manipulated and adapted to meet a variety of positions within this disjointed whole. For those lingering feminists who continued to believe in sexual self-determination as the key to liberation, Summer presented an image of sexuality that was



highly focused on the pleasure and agency of women. Those who moved away from the idea of sexual freedom as a means to liberation saw Summer as merely a sexualized object for the fulfillment of male fantasies. But Summer also offered a vision of romance, love, and mutual affection that fit well with the evolving sensibilities of radical and cultural feminists in the mid- to late-1970s.

Between 1975 and 1977, Donna Summer's most popular songs vocalized sex in a manner unprecedented in American popular music—a presentation that resulted in her branding as a sex goddess, as evidenced by a quick rundown of her work in those years. Summer and her producers followed the success of *Love to Love You Baby* with the rushed release of Summer's second album, *A Love Trilogy* in March 1976. The album featured more of Summer's sexy, wispy vocals in the single "Try Me, I Know We Can Make It" as well as an orgasmic interlude in Summer's new arrangement of Barry Manilow's otherwise tame "Could It Be Magic." While some critics praised it as "faster and harder sounding" than her first album, reviews also included such descriptions as "long hypnotic cuts with heavily sexy vocal" and "some heavy breathing from the Queen of Heavy Breathers."<sup>6</sup> Summer's next album, *Four Seasons of Love*, while more subtle, continued the trend with explicitly sexual music and lyrics. With its "breathy, seething vocals," *Rolling Stone* described it as "an extended exercise in ecstasy," and Casablanca advertised it as an album by the "First Lady of Love."<sup>7</sup> Summer's first album of 1977, *I Remember Yesterday*, included the number one single "I Feel Love," bringing sex into the electronic age through its synthesized rhythms and hypnotic soprano. With

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<sup>6</sup> Top Album Picks, Pop, *Billboard*, Donna Summer, *A Love Trilogy*, 27 March 1976; Top Single Picks, Soul, Donna Summer, "Try Me, I Know We Can Make It," *Billboard*, 8 May 1976; Vince Aletti, Review of *Four Seasons of Love*, *Rolling Stone*, 27 January 1977.

<sup>7</sup>Cromelin, "Love on the Road"; "The Definitive Disco Album" (advertisement) *Billboard*, 2 October 1976.

promotional and concert tours in which she made love to the microphone stand wearing dresses that showed more skin than they covered and magazine articles billing her as “The Sensuous Diva of Sex Rock,” Donna Summer seemed to be the epitome of sexual freedom, adventure, and ecstasy in a time when many Americans were more open to such ideas than ever before.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the music on these first four albums, all certified gold, offered a message of female empowerment and agency that would have appealed to numerous women, gay and straight. At a time when many women felt obligated to be sexually open so as not to be labeled prudish and felt a need to please men sexually even when they themselves were not receiving pleasure, Donna Summer sang openly and demonstrably about her own gratification.<sup>9</sup> In an era when images of male sexuality and women's sexual objectification dominated other forms of popular music, Summer's work focused on women as sexual subjects.<sup>10</sup> While the breathy vocals of Summer's early music do not suggest an overly aggressive female agency, the assertive nature of many lyrics would have appealed to women looking for liberation through sexual self-determination. In “Love to Love You Baby,” Summer sings, “Do it to me again and again” and tells her partner to “Lay your head down real close to me.”<sup>11</sup> Just the title of “Come With Me”

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<sup>8</sup>Maureen Orth, Betsy Carter, Lisa Whitman, “Get Up and Boogie,” *Newsweek*, 8 November 1976; “Donna Summer Rises to Top on Sexy Songs,” *Jet*, 9 December 1976; Patrick Pacheco, “The Sensuous Diva of Sex Rock,” *After Dark*, April 1977.

<sup>9</sup>Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 151, talks about discussions of faked orgasms in consciousness raising groups as evidence of women feeling obligated to please a man despite the absence of their own pleasure.

<sup>10</sup>On Summer singing as sexual subject see Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 122 and Echols, “‘Shaky Ground’: Popular Music in the Disco Years,” in *Shaky Ground: The '60s and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 185.

<sup>11</sup>Lyrics and music by Donna Summer, Pete Bellotte, and Giorgio Moroder, performed by Donna Summer, “Love to Love You Baby,” on *Love to Love You Baby*, compact disc (Polygram Records, 1975), 822 792-2. Unless otherwise noted, quoted lyrics are taken from Hugo Arevalo, “Donna Summer Lyrics,”

suggests that Summer will be giving the direction in this sexual encounter, not the man. In her single “Spring Affair,” Summer speaks of “just the man to set me free,” and in “Summer Fever,” she sings of a partner who can “satisfy and mystify my fever.” “Set me free” and “satisfy . . . my fever.”<sup>12</sup> Summer is not necessarily concerned with her partner’s pleasure; she is a woman focused on her own satisfaction and on finding the right man to fulfill it. By the time she sang, “you make me feel so good inside” in “Back in Love Again” and told the story of a “Black Lady” in which “her wish is his command, his life in her hands,” even her vocals had become more definitive and assertive in their presentation of female agency.<sup>13</sup> Pop culture critic Ken Tucker, writing for *Rolling Stone*, said that in *I Remember Yesterday* “Summer’s sexual breathiness [had] evolved into a sensual croon that exudes both power and vulnerability.”<sup>14</sup>

Summer’s erotic moans and groans in songs like “Love to Love You Baby” and “Could It Be Magic” clearly suggested that she was enjoying these sexual encounters, and the accompanying album art of her first two LPs visually supported this aural pleasure. Summer’s image visibly fed into the new environment of sexual experimentation for women in the 1970s, but not necessarily the limiting structure of heterosexual desire. The front cover of *Love to Love You Baby* pictures Summer from the waist up, head back, eyes closed, mouth open in ecstasy. It clearly places the focus on female pleasure but because of the range of the shot, does not necessarily define the

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<[http://www.geocities.com/h\\_arevalo/index3.html](http://www.geocities.com/h_arevalo/index3.html)>, created 10 February 1999, and corroborated with my own listening sessions.

<sup>12</sup> [author not credited], performed by Donna Summer, “Spring Affair” and “Summer Fever” on *Four Seasons of Love*, compact disc (Polygram Records, 1976), Casablanca Records, 826 236-2.

<sup>13</sup> Lyrics and music by Donna Summer, Giorgio Moroder, and Pete Bellotte, performed by Donna Summer, “Back in Love Again” and “Black Lady,” on *I Remember Yesterday*, LP, (Casablanca Record and Fillmworks, 1977), NBLP 7056.

<sup>14</sup> Ken Tucker, Review of *I Remember Yesterday*, *Rolling Stone*, 11 August 1977. Record Reviews in *Essence*, September 1977, also praised the vocal interpretations and versatility in the album.

origin of such bliss. Perhaps a male is attending to Summer's needs, perhaps a female; with her hands outside of the picture and below her waist, Summer may even be pleasing herself. A similar photograph graces the back cover of *A Love Trilogy*.<sup>15</sup> "Donna's eyes are closed in rapture; her mouth is open with an ecstatic feeling; come inside and enjoy this sexual sonic experience" is how entertainment journalist Eliot Tiegel described the image in *Billboard*. Most of the music within these albums, including the most successful singles, referenced a heterosexual relationship appealing to the dominant structure of American society. But some of Summer's songs do not denote the gender of the partner involved and, in conjunction with the music's embracing of sexual freedom and expression, appealed to a homosexual audience in terms of its message as well as its catchy dance beat.<sup>16</sup>

While Summer's album art tended to move away from highly eroticized poses in subsequent years, the sex goddess representation that Summer put forth with this early imagery, along with lyrics that emphasized female pleasure, would have been empowering for many women who were searching for female agency within the sexual arena—agency that many women had found otherwise lacking, especially in the early years of sexual revolution. A number of fans even claimed that Summer's music helped them become more sexually free. According to an article in the skin magazine *Oui*, some people claimed that "[ 'Love to Love You Baby' ] had saved their marriages and changed their lives." As reported in a feature on Donna Summer in the October 1977 issue of *Ebony*, her greatest fans—women and gay men—"thank her for helping them discover how, finally, to 'let go.'" And Summer was happy to be of service, saying, "people are

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<sup>15</sup> *Love Trilogy*, compact disc (PolyGram Records, 1976), Casablanca Records, 822 793-2.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot Tiegel, Close Up, "A Love Trilogy," *Billboard*, 27 March 1976; Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 173-4.

much too afraid to ‘just let themselves go and be sexually fulfilled’” and telling people “‘sexuality isn’t just getting into bed and having sex. . . . it’s about being aware of who you are and what your body is. . . . [and] that sex is also—but not *only*—something to please you and make you feel good.’”<sup>17</sup> While Summer, herself, might not have been completely open to sex for its own sake, she certainly was amenable to the idea that it was desirable for women to seek sex for pleasure under the right circumstances, and her music and sex goddess image were popular among those who saw the possibility for sexual freedom in her work.

Summer’s race heightened the significance behind the sense of female sexual agency that she provided in her songs. Taking her place in the increasingly sexualized black musical arena of the 1970s, Summer was singing against the trend of male soul artists who sang about patriarchy and the sexual objectification of women.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, she openly and assertively expressed her own desire and pleasure in a society in which, according to black intellectual Robert Staples, “many black men believe it is better to receive than give.”<sup>19</sup> Providing a space for sexual expression and agency, however, did not necessarily liberate women from the realities of a sexist society. For many black women, racism was as important as sexuality in defining their identity, if not more so. While it is significant that Summer’s music gave voice to the concept of female sexual agency, sexuality had the potential to be oppressive and empowering simultaneously. In the unique case of black women in America, the idea that Summer was playing herself off as an insatiable sexual creature would have struck an uncertain chord with women

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<sup>17</sup> Jim Esposito, “Donna Summer and Sex Rock,” *Oui*, September 1976, 88; Sanders, “Donna Summer,” 42.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America: From the Spirituals, Minstrels, and Ragtime to Soul, Disco, and Hip-Hop* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), 216; Neal, *What the Music Said*, 121.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Staples, “The Myth of Black Sexual Superiority: A Re-Examination,” in *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffer (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003), 222.

whose sexuality was defined by a history of sexual exploitation and stereotypes of promiscuous, hypersexualized jezebels.<sup>20</sup> Like Grace Jones and Labelle, Donna Summer challenged the “culture of dissemblance” that had come to define African-American women’s attempts to gain control over their sexuality and fight such stereotypes.<sup>21</sup> And as her career developed, she did so in a way that refused to separate sexual expression from respectability and sought to combine respectable romance with physical pleasure.

For many feminists in the 1970s—black or white—Summer’s sex goddess image would have proven more problematic than a simple expression of female agency. Some women, no doubt, interpreted such products as representing the exploitation of Summer by her male producers to fulfill the sexual fantasies of heterosexual men.<sup>22</sup> While this reading of Summer’s work is problematic in that it largely ignores the collaborative role that Summer played in her career, the erotic moaning and sexy album pictures were somewhat akin to the pornography that so strongly divided feminists in the late seventies and early eighties. Writers at the time were quick to point out that sexually liberated women fascinated men and that men often fantasized about easy sex with aggressive women.<sup>23</sup> Hearing Summer’s twenty-two orgasmic sighs in “Love to Love You Baby”

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<sup>20</sup> Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 102-103; Patricia Hill Collin, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 166, 174-5.

<sup>21</sup> For more on how Labelle and Grace Jones challenged the culture of dissemblance see previous chapter. Also see the article in which the term was first coined: Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 912-920.

<sup>22</sup> On disco as an over-produced musical medium, see John Rockwell, “Why Are the New Stars of Disco Mostly Women?” *New York Times*, 4 March 1979; Eve Zibart “Sex and the Singles Girls: Top Five Spots for Red-Light Rock,” *Washington Post*, 6 July 1979; and Judy Kutulas “‘You Probably Think This Song is About You’: 1970s Women’s Music from Carole King to the Disco Divas,” in *Disco Divas: Women’s Popular Culture in the 1970s*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> See Gay Talese quote in Zibart, “Sex and the Singles Girls”; George Frankl, *The Failure of the Sexual Revolution* (London : Kahn and Averill, 1974), 163. For a modern day analysis of female orgasm in music see John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis, “Aural Sex: The Female Orgasm in Popular Sound,” *The Drama*

and listening to her sing about her own sexual pleasure, may have seemed liberating in the void of female sexual agency in popular music up to that point, but it could have just as easily served as aural pornography for heterosexual males. Seeing Summer's erect nipples barely covered by a loose, white dress on the cover of *Love to Love You Baby* or the singer lounging on a crescent moon with smooth legs and bare back on the cover of *Four Seasons of Love* might have reminded some people of the pornographic images that were flooding the American market in the 1970s. Many women would have viewed these representations of boundless female sexuality as a celebration of pleasure for pleasure's sake—accepting the exciting potential of sex and pornography along with its dangers. Others, however, would have dismissed Summer's work as playing into a patriarchal and sexist construction of sexuality and as offering a simplified version of women's liberation as sexual liberation that was more digestible for the American mainstream than the all-encompassing political liberation that the originators of the movement supposedly purported.<sup>24</sup>

Descriptions of Donna Summer's music and people's response to her performance of it suggest that, in fact, many listeners—especially male listeners—took her image as sex goddess to heart and approached her work in a titillating sense. Male journalists such as Vince Aletti for *Rolling Stone* and Patrick Pacheco of *After Dark* commented that the dance floor and the bedroom were Summer's "main spheres of influence" and that *Love to Love You Baby*, *A Love Trilogy*, and *The Four Seasons of Love* "are so intensely steamy that listeners are spontaneously transported from the vertical to the supine, form

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*Review* 40, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 102-111. See also Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 100.

<sup>24</sup> For critiques of the media version of women's liberation as simple sexual liberation see Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 14, 43, 289-241; Zibart, "Sex and the Singles Girls"; and Kutulas, "1970s Women's Music," 174, 190-91.

the aural to the oral. More than mere vinyl, these discs are aphrodisiacs, finding berth on the bedroom shelf next to the love oils, satin sheets, and other erotica for the adult playpen.”<sup>25</sup> An article in the skin magazine *Oui* quoted Casablanca president, Neil Bogart, as calling “Love to Love You Baby” “the greatest fuck record!” in addition to being “the greatest dance record.”<sup>26</sup> Such descriptions helped to foster and exaggerate the sexy image that Bogart and Casablanca had derived for Summer and were not necessarily accurate depictions of listener response to Summer’s music. However, in its March 1978 cover feature on the singer, *Rolling Stone* told the story of a male fan at a Donna Summer concert who tells his friends, “You know that part in ‘Love To Love You Baby’ where she starts to fuck the microphone? I got so excited that I was jumping up and down until my little bastard stood up.”<sup>27</sup> While most popular with gay men and women, straight males were also attracted to Summer as a stimulating fantasy for their own sexual pleasure, contributing to the gold-caliber sales of her albums.

### **Reclaiming Respectability: 1977-1978**

Donna Summer’s music was not always an expression of female sexual aggressiveness, however, and in some instances, she ably mixed ideas of modern sexual activity for women with more traditional ideas of gendered sexual roles. For example, in her single “Come With Me” not only is Summer assertively giving direction; she also makes an attempt to ease her (assumedly) male partner’s discomfort about her sexual aggressiveness, singing, “Come with me/I give love’s guarantee/I will turn you on/right

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<sup>25</sup> Aletti, Review of *Four Seasons of Love*; Pacheco, “Sensuous Diva of Sex Rock,” 39.

<sup>26</sup> Jim Esposito, “Donna Summer and Sex Rock,” *Oui*, September 1976, 88.

<sup>27</sup> Gilmore, “Life after Disco?” 18.



or wrong/make you feel you belong.”<sup>28</sup> While such lyrics suggest a modern and active sexuality for women, they simultaneously revert to a sexual structure based on women accommodating male pleasure. On Summer’s *I Remember Yesterday* album, the song “Take Me” mixes lyrics such as “Take me, I’ll be your woman/Use me, make me your own,” which gives the male power in the relationship, with lines that say, “I want you, I know what I want, I want what I see,” a clear expression of female agency and consent in her pursuit of sexual pleasure.<sup>29</sup>

For those uncomfortable with society’s drive toward less traditional sex roles, Donna Summer’s music was not short of more conventional ideas of overly emotional females desperate to hang on to the men they love. The three B-side songs on Summer’s *Love to Love You Baby* album, which included titles such as “Full of Emptiness” and “Need-a-Man Blues,” were probably the most desperate and weak-sounding songs in Summer’s collection, as she sings of lost loves that, at their most extreme, lead her to drinking.<sup>30</sup> Songs on future albums, while not sounding nearly as desperate as these initial love songs, expressed such emotions as “Empty since he left me/I still need him and want him/Without him I’m nothing” and “Can’t we just sit down and talk it over.”<sup>31</sup> Songs like these reveal another side to “Donna Summer, sex goddess”—a side that might have resonated with those women (or men) who were not yet ready to abandon emotional

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<sup>28</sup>Lyrics and music by Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellotte, performed by Donna Summer, “Come With Me,” *A Love Trilogy*.

<sup>29</sup>Lyrics and music by Donna Summer, Giorgio Moroder, and Pete Bellotte, performed by Donna Summer, “Take Me,” *I Remember Yesterday*.

<sup>30</sup>Lyrics and music by Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellotte, performed by Donna Summer, “Full of Emptiness,” “Need-a-Man Blues,” “Whispering Waves,” “Pandora’s Box,” all on *Love to Love You Baby*. While these songs may not be “disco” per se (“Need-A-Man Blues” being the only exception)—they certainly did not fit Moroder’s new Euro-disco formula—they are significant in that they reveal a softer, more vulnerable, side to the supposed queen of sex rock—and on the flip side of her raunchiest and most controversial record, no less.

<sup>31</sup>Lyrics by Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellotte, performed by Donna Summer, “Wasted,” *A Love Trilogy* and lyrics by Donna Summer, Giorgio Moroder, and Pete Bellotte, performed by Donna Summer, “Can’t We Just Sit Down (And Talk It Over),” *I Remember Yesterday*.

love completely for a sexuality that revolved exclusively around a quest for orgasm or to accept the idea of an independent woman who did not need to devote her life to a man in order to be happy.

Indeed, love and romance is as much a theme in Summer's music as is the physical act of sex, making emotions and intimacy as central to her sexual self-determination as physical pleasure and orgasm. What is more, the love she sings about—be it emotional or physical—is almost always monogamous in nature. In “Could it Be Magic,” the same song in which she lets out orgasmic cries of pleasure, Summer also mentions her boyfriend, Peter, by name, letting the listener know that this ecstasy is reserved for only one man at a time, not necessarily the uninhibited promiscuity that many women and feminists felt defined the sexual revolution of the time.<sup>32</sup> By paying homage to the musical sounds of earlier eras in her album *I Remember Yesterday*, some of Summer's songs revert to the monogamous and “repressed” ideals of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, with songs that have no definitive connection to physical sex. In the title track, the main character sings about “that first night” spent dancing until dawn with a partner she has just met as well as how much she is in love with this one person: “from the very start, you stole my heart/I knew right then we would never part.” The main theme of “Back in Love Again” is how “lately it's only you on my mind.” She combines these “innocent” songs with the sexy lyrics of “Take Me” and the futuristic erotica of “I Feel Love.”<sup>33</sup> In singing about the love, affection, and emotions that are a part of sex, and mixing them with the physical pleasure made explicit by the high and breathy vocals that

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<sup>32</sup> Lyrics and music by Manilow/Anderson, performed by Donna Summer, “Could it Be Magic,” *A Love Trilogy*. At the time this song was recorded, Donna Summer was, in fact, dating a man by the name of Peter Muhldorfer with whom she later broke up to be with her future husband, Bruce Sudano.

<sup>33</sup> Writing credit for all songs on *I Remember Yesterday* given to Summer, Moroder, and Bellotte.

defined most of Summer's early work, she spoke to the debates that were raging among the feminist community in the mid- to late-1970s. Summer herself made no statement about feminist inclinations, but her music represented, in some form, the shift that Jane Gerhard contends feminists underwent at that time and that women's magazines highlighted for non-movement women (see chapter 2)—moving from orgasm to intimacy and endowing both with significant meaning and power.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, much of Summer's music was highly oriented toward concepts of mutual affection, not simply the pleasure of one partner or the other—a sentiment that spoke to feminist ideas that love and sex should be fundamentally egalitarian.<sup>35</sup> “Come With Me” is again instructive in this sense. Summer is giving direction as she attempts to satisfy her partner and make him/her comfortable with her sexual assertiveness, but she does so in a song that is highly focused on a “message of love to be shared,” as Eliot Tiegel put it in his review of *A Love Trilogy*.<sup>36</sup> The song includes lyrics such as “give my share and take my share” and “we'll just take it slow as we go/enjoy it all as we fall [emphasis added].” In “Try Me, I Know We Can Make It,” Summer sings, “Fill me to the top, fill me with love/now baby is my loving good/I just wanna feel your body close to mine/I just wanna share your love.”<sup>37</sup> The singer not only wants to be satisfied herself; she wants to make sure that her “loving” is good for her partner so that they can both share in this pleasurable experience, a far cry from the self-absorbed sexual fulfillment that most male artists had been singing about. Filling the role of sex symbol meant Summer's songs, especially in her first few albums, were often highly sexually oriented;

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<sup>34</sup> Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 152.

<sup>35</sup> Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 152; Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (Washington Square, N.Y.: New York University Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Tiegel, Close Up, “A Love Trilogy.”

<sup>37</sup> Lyrics and music by Giorgio Moroder, Pete Bellotte, Donna Summer, performed by Donna Summer, “Try Me, I Know We Can Make It,” *A Love Trilogy*.

they fit well into the new environment of sexual freedom in American society and provided a space for females to discover a sense of sexual self-determination. But the messages of sexuality that Summer's recordings conveyed were not always consistent; her songs presented a variety of ways to interpret love and sex and are representative of the fragmented nature of the social changes occurring at the time.

In a disco industry founded on the celebration of marginalized sexuality and sexual freedom, however, it sometimes proved hard for listeners and reporters to view Summer as anything other than a sex goddess. Summer's image as "First Lady of Love" fit perfectly into the sexualized nature of the disco scene, and with such a reputation preceding her, journalists were often surprised by the real life Donna Summer who greeted them for interviews. The feature press that magazines published on her presents a much more complex and ambivalent image than that of simple sex symbol—one that was multivalent and not necessarily what the general disco listener might have expected. In one of the earliest feature articles written on the new sexy star, Jim Esposito, freelance writer contributing to *Oui*, was "ready for one of the great cock teasings of [his] life," but was met instead by an unassuming woman who simply "[shook] his hand and mumble[d] 'Niceta meetcha.'" Esposito goes on to talk about how Summer's *Love to Love You Baby* was "as close to obscene as anything that has ever been on the radio," eliciting enough controversy and listener complaints to force the FCC to consider censoring it. According to the article, exotic dancers at a Los Angeles club did not even like dancing to the song because it was too hard to be more erotic than the record. But Esposito also mentioned that "she's only good for one or two [orgasms] at a time," according to her boyfriend; that her live stage show in Las Vegas made it evident that "Summer can really sing"; and

that she would not leave rehearsal until all the glitter had been removed from her eyelids because “she doesn’t want to ‘look like a hooker.’” While the article focused more on Summer’s sexy image, it presented inconsistencies that point to her as less than sexually voracious and conscious of her sexualized image without wanting to capitulate to it outside of concert performances. Summer was willing to perform sexual agency and aggression in concert, but her real-life performance of sexuality was something very different. Even in concert, she gave a performance that acted as a powerful statement of her vocal talents at the same time that it served as a statement of sexually empowered women. And the fact that she believed her makeup made her “look like a hooker” puts into relief her conflicted stance on the sexual agency she performed.<sup>38</sup>

In the spring of 1977, celebrity profiler Patrick Pacheco’s *After Dark* feature further extended the contradictions between Donna Summer the performer and Donna Summer the person. He, too, had expected sexy extravagance on his introduction to the “First Lady of Love”: “Brainwashed by Casablanca’s superlative supersleek publicity machine, I had hoped to find Donna languorously lying on the front lawn in a sheer silky chemise, surrounded by exhausted hot-blooded males while breathily singing, ‘Let me know the wonder of all of you.’” But the down-to-earth woman he ended up interviewing “confirm[ed] the likely suspicion that Donna Summer, Love Goddess, is an assumed role,” and Pacheco devoted in the remainder of the article to dispelling the idea that Donna Summer and sex were synonymous. He explained that “her other emotions are as up front as her sexuality”; described her with such adjectives as professional, cooperative, and charming; and explained how her “talent was nurtured in the church”—all descriptions that added depth to an otherwise shallow image. The photographs

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<sup>38</sup> Esposito, “Donna Summer and Sex Rock.”

included in the *After Dark* feature visually depicted this more multifaceted image of Donna Summer. On the front, next to the title—“The Sensuous Diva of Sex Rock”—there is a full-length picture of Summer in a glorified peasant gown and four-inch heels. Summer is caught in motion with one foot firmly on the ground and the other lifted up behind her; her head is cocked to one side, eyes half closed and lips parted in a look of sensual satisfaction similar to the images on her early album covers. This image was juxtaposed, however, with a much simpler (and smaller) head and shoulders shot of Summer’s lovely face, which makes no suggestion of sexual pleasure. The images in the back of the article show Summer in all her different roles—a strong and creative diva-like pose, a professional handshake with disc jockey Frankie Crocker, and “the happy lover with her boyfriend.” Just like in her music, the image presented of Summer in the press, while constantly overshadowed by the sex symbol image, was never entirely engulfed by it. She presented multiple possibilities for how to understand the new sexual atmosphere of the time, and consumers could choose to adapt the various representations to their own sensibilities.<sup>39</sup>

It seemed especially important that Summer completely deconstruct her sex goddess image for the subscribers of the African American magazine, *Ebony*, in December of 1977, and many readers seemed to appreciate the clarification. Unlike Esposito and Pacheco, *Ebony*’s managing editor, Charles L. Sanders, did not talk about how he expected an erotic experience when taking on the assignment to interview Donna Summer. Instead, he opened his article with a story about a man who dialed a wrong number and spoke with Summer for half an hour before he “flipped” when Summer told him her name and shared a laugh over Summer’s supposed sex image. The fact that

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<sup>39</sup> Pacheco, “Sensuous Diva of Sex Rock.”

Sanders was writing an article about a woman who “insists that she isn’t sexy at all” and who tried to live a simple life and be a good mother to her daughter is clear even before reading—even before opening the magazine. On the cover was a photograph of Summer with her daughter, Mimi, in her lap. The only picture of Summer in any sort of racy costume was dwarfed on the first page of the article by a much larger image of Mimi giving her mother, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, a great big kiss on the cheek. Photographs of Summer at home, cooking with Mimi, at work in the studio, or posing with her boyfriend and his art filled the rest of the article. Those who actually took the time to read the article would have learned that Summer “hasn’t missed a night in 18 years of getting down on [her] knees and . . . thanking God for being so good to [her]”; that she is “an excellent cook and enjoys preparing meals for her daughter”; she had her first sexual experience when she was almost eighteen, but it was not until she spent time in Europe that she was really able to “let go”; and that she had accepted her sex symbol image as a way of getting people’s attention, but she did not want to be known only as a sex object.<sup>40</sup>

For a black community that, in the 1970s, was still dealing with stereotypes of hypersexuality and promiscuity and whose family life had historically been threatened by slavery, poverty, and racism, it was significant that Summer be shown as a multifaceted woman who did not necessarily live up to her image as “The Greatest Lay in the World.” Like Sister Sledge, Summer sought to represent a black female sexuality that could still fit into a framework of respectability and the family values of the black middle class, something to which her fans responded positively. Letters to the editor reveal that, prior to the article’s exposure of the “real” Donna Summer, her sex goddess image had

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<sup>40</sup> Sanders, “Donna Summer,” 33-42.

overwhelmed people: they were glad to learn that there was more to their beloved star, that she “doesn’t lean on her sexiness.” The letters are also evidence of the fact that Summer had an African-American fan base of both men and women, many who already “loved her for her singing” and had even more esteem for her now that they had learned the “truth” about her as a person.<sup>41</sup> Sexually conservative black fans could take pride in the economic success of a black performer without compromising their commitment to respectability as a central element of racial uplift. Some African Americans may not have respected Summer’s role in what they saw as Eurodisco’s whitening of black music, but others were attracted to her talent, to her beauty, and to her voicing of female sexual agency, even more so once they knew that that sexuality was more multifaceted than her image would suggest.

Yet, Summer was never completely consistent in the way she represented herself racially. *Ebony* may have highlighted her domestic leanings and maternal instincts, but most mainstream articles either mentioned nothing of her mixed-race daughter and past relationships or breezed by the subjects with little discussion; it was by no means a focus of articles as is it was for Sanders. When *Jet* asked her if she felt it hard to relate to blackness having been out of the country for “a very formative part of our Black history,” Summer replied, “No way! I’ve maintained my color and whatever else goes with that. My Blackness . . . that hasn’t changed.”<sup>42</sup> However, she would later tell *The Washington Post*, “in Germany, I didn’t have that sense of color, it was just me. So when I came back, I really had a sense of being lost, I didn’t know who I was supposed to be.”<sup>43</sup> Even in describing her musical genre and vocal ability, Summer was ambiguous. In 1976, she

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<sup>41</sup> Letters to the Editor, *Ebony*, December 1977.

<sup>42</sup> “Summer Rises to Top,” 55.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Harrington, “Donna Summer’s Saving Grace” *Washington Post*, 29 July 1981.



tried to convince readers of *Essence* that she “sing[s] like a soul sister,” while in 1978, she told *Rolling Stone* “because my skin is black they categorize me as a black act, which is not the truth. I’m not even a soul singer. I’m more a pop singer.”<sup>44</sup> It seems that Summer was a savvy businesswoman and knew her audience in each media and publicity venture, making every effort to appeal to the sensibilities of a variety of racial notions in the same way that her music might have appealed to a variety of sexual inclinations. When she appeared on the back cover of *Four Seasons of Love* mimicking Marilyn Monroe’s famous pose over the subway grate, with the white dress billowing up around her legs, it seemed to be the ultimate fusion of black with white and of a female sexuality that could be both active and passive.

Summer’s representations of sexuality and blackness were never quite consistent, and she tended to deal with the fame that developed from her sexy image with a somewhat ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, she took advantage of the sexually saturated culture of the 1970s to create a niche for herself in America’s musical history and used it to build a career. On the other, she felt uncomfortable relying on something that, to her, felt somewhat disingenuous. In an industry defined by the celebration of freedom and excess, Summer used sex to sell records. She readily admitted that she used her image as a stepping stone to a lucrative career: “If I’d known seven years ago that all I had to do was groan, I would have been groaning.”<sup>45</sup> It seems that Summer found her sexuality to be empowering in not just the love arena, but in the business arena as well. But while Summer may have suggested to *Rolling Stone* that she was comfortable with (and perhaps even thankful for) the candid representation of her sexuality projected by

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<sup>44</sup> As quoted in Vernon Gibbs, “Up from the Discos: Gloria Gaynor, B.T. Express and Donna Summer,” *Essence*, May 1976, 35; and Gilmore, “Life after Disco?” 18.

<sup>45</sup> Cromelin, “Love on the Road.”

her early albums, she also commented, “I don’t intend to let an image make me.”<sup>46</sup> Was Summer presenting her sexuality as liberating and empowering or degrading and constraining? Her ambivalent statements about the role of sex in her career left it to the individual audience member to decide. For Summer, the opportunities that the sexual revolution afforded her career were not necessarily positive, but she was willing to work with them. As she told *Newsweek* at the end of 1976, “you *have* to sell yourself cheap. . . . I said, ‘OK, I’ll do it’—you can always change people’s minds.”<sup>47</sup> In 1978, she reiterated this feeling in *Time*: “The furor over *Love to Love You Baby* was certainly good for my bank account . . . but it gave me a one-sided image as a sex queen. But a person is not one thing.”<sup>48</sup> For a woman who, early-on in her American career, told *Jet* that her ultimate goal was to achieve longevity and an image of celebrity royalty, settling for selling sex through disco was too limiting. She was determined to be recognized for her talent, not just her sexuality.<sup>49</sup>

Fearing she had become merely a part of the machine, Summer attempted to redefine her image and took more control of her career beginning with the variety of musical genres in *I Remember Yesterday* and especially in her final album of 1977, *Once Upon A Time*. While her name had appeared on some song credits on prior albums—even some of her sexiest hits, including “Love to Love You Baby” and “Try Me, I Know We Can Make It”—Summer received writing credit, along with her producers, for every song on *Once Upon A Time*. She claims they were “mostly autobiographical,” and in addition to resembling what she remembers as a suffocating and frightening childhood,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Orth, Carter, Whitman, “Get Up and Boogie!” 97.

<sup>48</sup> Jay Cocks, “Gaudy Reign of the Disco Queen,” *Time*, 4 December 1978, 93.

<sup>49</sup> “Summer Rises to Top,” 55.

the songs seem representative of her frustration within the limiting genre of disco, especially in a song with the title “Faster and Faster to Nowhere.”<sup>50</sup> The album maintained the same danceable beat listeners had come to expect from the Queen of Disco, but Summer and her producers organized it under a theme that was not nearly as sensuous and orgasmic as previous albums: *Once Upon A Time* is a four-act concept album that presented a modern, urban-based retelling of a Cinderella story. Critics praised the album's creativity as “a fanfare announcing disco’s artistic coming of age” and “a collection of heartfelt songs . . . [that] ranges from the upbeat and catchy to exquisitely poignant ballads.”<sup>51</sup> Its album art featured Summer dressed in a full-covering white dress, which presented her in an innocent, princess-like fashion, and the musical story oscillated between lands of fantasy and reality to describe the life of a working-class girl searching for love in a crushing city.<sup>52</sup>

With love and romance taking center stage in this happily ending story, the ideas of erotic, physical sex that were so prominent in Summer’s previous albums are almost completely absent in *Once Upon A Time*. There is no moaning or heavy breathing, and sex is merely implied in only a couple songs through lyrics like “I’m gonna make him want it” or “I’ve been held closely by a stranger.”<sup>53</sup> But while this album seemed to veer completely away from the Summer as sex symbol image, at least one song suggests that Summer had not completely abandoned the idea of a woman’s sexual liberation. “If You Got It Flaunt It” encourages women to “make them want it now” by putting their “better

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<sup>50</sup> For references to *Once Upon A Time* as autobiographical, see Barbara Graustark and Janet Huck, “The Long Hot Summer,” *Newsweek*, 2 April 1979, 59 and Gilmore, “Life After Disco?”

<sup>51</sup> John Rockwell, Records, “The Disco Fever is Spreading,” *New York Times*, 26 February 1978; Radcliff Joe, Close Up, review of *Once Upon A Time*, *Billboard*, 7 December 1977.

<sup>52</sup> *Once Upon A Time*, compact disc (PolyGram Records, 1977), Casablanca Record and FilmWorks 826 238-2 M-1.

<sup>53</sup> Lyrics from Donna Summer, Giorgio Moroder, Pete Bellotte, “If You Got It Flaunt It” and “Sweet Romance” taken from album insert included with *Once Upon A Time* compact disc.

features” on display for men to lust after.<sup>54</sup> The song did not necessarily coincide with how feminists imagined sexual liberation to be—talking of “catty creatures” and telling the other “leeches” to step aside certainly is not indicative of the political sisterhood feminists had in mind. Nonetheless, the song spoke to the ways in which the sexual revolution had opened such avenues to women and how women’s liberation had become mediated by a sexualized commercial culture and redefined by individual women as its ideas spread and splintered into the mainstream.

Disco was a confining sound for Donna Summer, and as she attempted to push her image in other directions with *Once Upon A Time*, she also began to branch out musically.<sup>55</sup> The majority of songs on *Once Upon A Time* stuck to the Munich sound developed by her producers and definitive of Euro-disco, but the vocal range on the album stretches from the mousey “little girl voice” that made her famous (minus the moans and groans) to strong, soulful vocals in songs such as “A Man Like You” or “I Love You.” As feminist music journalist Georgia Christgau put it, “If you still hear the same woman who breathed and breezed through ‘Love to Love You, Baby’ on a tune like ‘I Love You,’ then you’re being stubborn.”<sup>56</sup> Summer belted it out in “MacArthur Park Suite” on her 1978 release *Live and More*, brought the power of her voice to an even wider audience with Grammy- and Academy Award-winning “Last Dance,” and further stretched her disco roots on 1979’s *Bad Girls*, which was as much rock as it was disco.

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<sup>54</sup> Lyrics and music by Donna Summer, Giorgio Moroder, Pete Bellotte, performed by Donna Summer, “If You Got It Flaunt It,” *Once Upon a Time*.

<sup>55</sup> Some might argue that Summer’s first attempt to expand her musical image was with *I Remember Yesterday*, which included a variety of songs meant to serve as a tribute to earlier genres of music. While its variation of musical interpretations is significant, I find the lyrics of many of the songs to be as sexual as anything Summer had sung previously. I believe that the central role Summer played in the writing of *Once Upon A Time* and its almost complete absence of all things relating to physical sex are a much more significant stretch both musically and in terms of her attempts to redefine her image.

<sup>56</sup> Georgia Christgau, “Donna Summer Plays Around,” *Village Voice*, 30 January 1978, 41.

As disco experienced a simultaneous peak and backlash in mainstream American popular culture, Donna Summer was developing a new image for herself that would guarantee her survival after the disco daze had passed.

### **Complicated Musical Fusions: 1978-1980**

Most critics would agree that the years 1978 and 1979 were the height of both mainstream disco and Donna Summer's popularity; Summer herself remembers 1978 as being "an amazing year."<sup>57</sup> What is more, these years seemed to suggest that Summer had found success in her crusade to revamp her sex goddess image, to be respected for her talent as much as for her appearance and sexy reputation. Journalists focused much less on Summer's sex appeal and much more on her vocal ability and contributions to pop music. Moreover, the photographs that accompanied these articles had gone, for the most part, from full-length shots of Summer in sexy dresses or her revealing show costumes to simpler, more head-and-shoulder photos of Summer's pretty face, most often mere croppings of the publicity shots from her album covers.<sup>58</sup> Journalists recognized her immediate task of trying to escape the sex symbol image disco had created for her and her success in rejecting the notion that she should be categorized as only a disco singer. They praised her versatility as a performer and proclaimed her to be perhaps the only disco star not only to produce songs that contained a distinct attention to lyrics but to transcend disco and make it "triumphantly" in the larger pop arena. Donna Summer

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<sup>57</sup> Summer, *Ordinary Girl*, 161.

<sup>58</sup> For examples of basic head-and-shoulder shots of Summer, see D.A., Movies, "Dancing Daze," *Newsweek*, 12 June 1978; Edward Buxbaum, "Donna Summer: The Uncrowned Queen of Disco Summarizes Five Years of Stardom," *Stereo Review*, February 1979; Jacqueline Trescott, "Donna Summer: Intimate and Untouchable," *Washington Post*, 3 April 1978; John Rockwell, "Donna Summer Has Begun to Win Respect," *New York Times*, 26 July 1979; John Rockwell, *The Pop Life*, "Donna Summer Fuses Rock and Disco," *New York Times*, 18 May 1979.

seemed to have attained her goal of being a respected, career-oriented artist as well as sexual agent.

Concert reviews also reveal an increasing amount of respect for Summer's talent, at the same time revealing the continued breadth of her musical offerings in terms of sexuality. In reviews of her live concerts, including the tour from which the performance for *Live and More* was drawn, journalists commented that she "has a full-throated voice with excellent range which she is capable of using to peak emotional effect" and that "two years ago, some critics said Donna Summer was good. It's time to say she's great, a major musical presence."<sup>59</sup> One critic even remarked that the medley of standards Summer performed—classic songs completely devoid of sexual innuendo including "The Way We Were" and "Some of These Days"—would not necessarily go over well with an inner-city crowd, but "it was just the ticket for this crowd which was predominately middle age, middle class and white."<sup>60</sup> By at least early 1978, Summer was attracting an audience that one might not at first expect a sexy, black disco singer to draw. Perhaps it had to do with the revamping of her image; perhaps it was more about the massive expansion of disco into the American mainstream. Most likely, it was a little of both.

She may have made deliberate moves to change her image that reviewers readily acknowledged, but Summer never quite abandoned the sexual repertoire that had defined

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<sup>59</sup> Shie, Night Club Reviews, review of Donna Summer concert at Sahara Tahoe, *Variety*, 8 February 1978 and May, Concert Reviews, review of Summer concert at Universal amphitheater in Los Angeles, *Variety* 28 June 1978.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Ford, Jr., Talent in Action, review of Donna Summer concert in Cherry Hill, NJ, *Billboard*, 7 January 1978. In Rockwell, "Win Respect," he mentions that Summer's record buying audience was integrated, especially after the release of *Bad Girls*; she attributed the "paleness" of her concert audiences to "music-business politics." Interestingly, Tom Smucker claims, "The most amazing thing about Donna Summer's concert at the Felt Forum last year [1978] was the audience – the most varied as far as class, race, age, sexual preference, and style that I could remember." See Tom Smucker, "Donna Summer Seduces Everyone," *Village Voice*, 28 May 1979, 59. Perhaps Summer had garnered a wider audience than Ford or Rockwell recognized.

her image in the first place. In the same concerts that critics praised as showcasing her versatility, Summer still performed “Love to Love You Baby” and “other musical celebrations of sensuality, and she projected a lot of shapely leg” and did “all the things in public your mother forbade you to do in private.”<sup>61</sup> As the 1978 *Rolling Stone* story of the man who possessed the excited “little bastard” shows, at least some of her audience still defined her as “disco’s Aphrodite,” and “in the end her audiences get what they’ve paid to see.”<sup>62</sup> One reviewer apparently had not picked up on Summer’s evolving image, describing her early 1978 show in Vegas as “a potently full and fruity voice wedded to attractive, perky face and sumptuous curvy figure where all the motions, garments, and accessories cry out for horizontal position.”<sup>63</sup> In striking contrast to the decidedly non-sex-oriented review of her Lake Tahoe show just a week earlier, it becomes clear that Summer had not convinced everyone that her vocal ability was more significant than her sexual prowess.<sup>64</sup> Summer claimed that “Sex Queen of the ‘70s” was merely an image with which she had been plagued.<sup>65</sup> She saw herself as oversexed by the media, and tried to clarify her personal stance on sexuality by telling the readers of *Time* that she “can’t have an affair of the body without one of the mind.”<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, by holding on to the sexy songs and moans that made her famous, she was sending mixed messages about how a woman’s sexuality ought to be harnessed and in doing so, became one of the most popular performers of the decade.

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<sup>61</sup> May, review of Summer concert and Trescott, “Intimate and Untouchable.”

<sup>62</sup> Gilmore, “Life After Disco?” and Graustark and Huck, “Long Hot Summer,” 59. Also see Wood, Concert Reviews, review of Summer concert in Blaisdell, Honolulu, *Variety*, 27 June 1979.

<sup>63</sup> Will, Night Club Reviews, review of Summer concert at the Las Vegas Hilton, *Variety*, 15 February 1978.

<sup>64</sup> Joe X. Price, Talent in Action, review of Summer concert at Sahara Tahoe, *Billboard*, 13 January 1979.

<sup>65</sup> “Summer Rises to Top,” 52.

<sup>66</sup> Summer quoted in Cocks, “Gaudy Reign of the Disco Queen,” 93.

The remainder of 1978 saw Summer expand her career into acting with the movie *Thank God It's Friday* and also included the release of *Live and More*, which became Donna Summer's first number one album and eventually reached double platinum status. Most noticeably a reflection of the explosion of disco music in the American mainstream after the success of *Saturday Night Fever*, the success of *Live and More* was also evidence of Summer's expanding popularity on the basis of a mixed bag of sexual identities. But the album that most accentuated Summer's complex representations of female sexuality was *Bad Girls*, which hit number one on the charts, eventually sold over three million copies, and was nominated for "Album of the Year" at the 1980 Grammy Awards.<sup>67</sup> Critics definitely picked up, this time, on the multivalent sexual persona Summer tended to express through her music. Brian Chin, writer for various music industry trade magazines, described *Bad Girls* as "a varied group of love songs that express the gamut from idealism to anguish, and expectancy to disillusionment, in apparently random order," and music critic Tom Smucker said, "she roams on the album from light-voiced disco romantic to funky rock sexpot."<sup>68</sup> Now that she had moved far enough beyond her original sex-kitten image with the release of albums that had gained her recognition and rewards for her musical talent, Summer vigorously brought her sexuality back into the open. But this time, she projected a different sexual demeanor, a more defiant and confident one, especially when her strong vocal ability is taken into account and compared with the wispy, breathy vocals of her earlier work. As rock critic Stephen Holden put it, "Summer's coyness is replaced by a hard-boiled, street-cookie directness." But while Holden saw the album and its "street-cookie directness" as "a

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<sup>67</sup> *Bad Girls* also included three hit singles, two of which reached number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 – "Hot Stuff" and "Bad Girls" – and one that made it to number two – "Dim All the Lights."

<sup>68</sup> Brian Chin, *Disco File*, *Record World*, 5 May 1979, 30 and Smucker, "Summer Seduces Everyone," 59.



virtual paean to commercial sex,” the record actually maintained the complexity of subject matter that had been a part of all Summer’s albums.<sup>69</sup>

With *Bad Girls*, Summer continued to sing about both love and sex, to explore mutual affection while keeping female pleasure at the forefront, and to walk the line between women’s sexual liberation and objectification. In “Hot Stuff,” Summer is proactive about finding “a wild man” to bring back home so she does not have to “spend another night on [her] own.” In “Dim All the Lights,” she has a romantic night with her lover, directing him to “Dim all the lights sweet darling/’Cause tonight it’s all the way.”<sup>70</sup> It is a song about monogamous and mutual pleasure. And while it doesn’t include the erotic moans and groans of her earlier songs, it certainly reminds the listener of the same unquenchable desire for pleasure that made Summer famous, including lyrics such as “Do what you want/You can use me all up/Take me bottom to top/Don’t leave even one drop.”<sup>71</sup> More importantly, Donna Summer wrote the song herself—both lyrics and music—and it cannot be interpreted as a manipulation of her talent by her male producers. The album included several writing credits for Summer, both in collaboration and solo.<sup>72</sup> While critics often described the third side of the original double-album,

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<sup>69</sup> Stephen Holden, “Donna Summer’s Hot-to-Trot ‘Bad Girls,’” review of *Bad Girls*, *Rolling Stone*, 12 July 1979. Since Holden was a male journalist writing for one of the preeminent rock magazines of the day, it is likely that his interpretation was skewed due to a feeling of unease with a black woman assertively singing about her own enjoyment in an arena that previously had been almost exclusively the domain of white men singing about male pleasure.

<sup>70</sup> Lyrics for P. Bellotte, H. Faltermeyer, K. Forsey, “Hot Stuff,” and Donna Summer, “Dim All the Lights,” taken from insert of *Bad Girls*, compact disc. Interestingly, Summer changes these lyrics in later versions. As early as a 1983 concert, *A Hot Summer Night with Donna Summer*, she replaced this opening line with “Dim all the lights sweet darling/’Cause the night is on its way,” possibly as a response to her conversion to born-again Christianity around the end of 1979.

<sup>71</sup> The *Bad Girls* CD insert quotes these lyrics as “Take me bottom to top/Don’t leave anything undone,” but having listened to the song multiple times at varying volumes, I am certain Summer sings, “Don’t leave even one drop.”

<sup>72</sup> Summer is co-credited on “Lucky,” “On My Honor,” “All Through the Night,” and “Bad Girls.” She receives sole writing credits for “Dim All the Lights,” “My Baby Understands,” and “There Will Always Be a You.”

which included the majority of Summer's own songs, as the "schlockiest part of the record," this collection of songs also revealed the more romantic side of Summer's sexy image.<sup>73</sup>

Summer also undertook a new topic on her *Bad Girls* album—prostitution. Summer not only appears as a hooker on the album cover art, a concept for which she received credit; she makes a commentary about the illicit activity in the title single. She explains in her autobiography that she wrote the song in response to an incident in which a policeman mistook her friend for a prostitute, causing Summer to consider what life must be like for women who participated in sex work in order to make a living. It is a concept that she says especially angered her (and her friend) as a black woman, saying the policeman concluded that her friend was a prostitute simply because she was black and walking where the "bad girls" walked.<sup>74</sup> Critics like Holden interpreted the song as a celebration of the illicit profession, largely due to the latter part of the song in which Summer, as singer, goes from being critical observer to participant, shouting, "Hey, mister, have you got a dime?"<sup>75</sup> Other lyrics, however—"talking 'bout the sad girls," "You ask yourself who they are/Like everybody else/they come from near and far (wanna be a star)"—suggest that, less a celebration of prostitution, the song was merely an attempt to legitimize the activity in the minds of others. Summer seemed to be acknowledging that some women—either by choice or by necessity—live this life and suggesting that society should not necessarily view them as different from anyone else. As Summer puts it, "my friend was working a real job, but weren't these so-called bad

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<sup>73</sup> Rockwell, "Fuses Rock and Disco."

<sup>74</sup> Summer, *Ordinary Girl*, 171.

<sup>75</sup> Holden, "Hot-to-Trot," 71-72. Also see Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 367; Jim Miller, Jim Miller on pop music, "A Pipe to Share," *The New Republic*, 27 October 1979; Neal, *What the Music Said*, 122.

girls doing so as well? Were they really all that different? . . . It was about sadness, the sadness of these girls' lives."<sup>76</sup> The critics have shown that the song was open to interpretation, but Summer, in acknowledging the humanity of these women, expressed anger over and continued to work against stereotypes that correlated black women with sexual depravity and lead to the assumption concerning her friend's occupation simply based on her race.

More than just a panoply of sexual identities, however, *Bad Girls* was also a successful experiment in the fusion of two musical genres often deemed incompatible—rock and disco. In fact, Summer was honored with her second Grammy Award for Best Female *Rock* Vocal Performance on the single “Hot Stuff.” In the context of disco's demise, occurring at the same time that *Bad Girls* was climbing to the top of the pop charts, the ability of Summer and her producers to transcend their strict disco mold was extremely significant. Critics praised Summer as having become “even more the embodiment of versatility and heart we've come to know” and praised the album for “mak[ing] it suddenly clear that the supposed gulf between disco and rock isn't really so wide.”<sup>77</sup> Many also attributed Summer's increased audience to this tactic.<sup>78</sup> More significant is the fact that Summer was an African-American woman singing about female sexuality—and garnering hits with it—in an arena historically dominated by white male rockers singing about finding their own “satisfaction.” By singing against the majority of white and sexist songs in the rock genre, Summer most likely gained a number of female rock fans as well as mainstream feminists who found such messages liberating. Summer attracted women and gay men with her varied ideas of sexuality and

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<sup>76</sup> Summer, *Ordinary Girl*, 171.

<sup>77</sup> Chin, *Disco File*, *Record World*, 5 May 1979 30; Rockwell, “Fuses Rock and Disco.”

<sup>78</sup> Smucker, “Summer Seduces Everyone”; Miller, “A Pipe to Share” and Rockwell, “Win Respect.”

sexual liberation, but her undeniable talent in singing what was basically “rock-and-roll with a disco beat,” now attracted rock fans as well—even those most critical of her as a sexual creature could not deny her vocal ability.<sup>79</sup> Summer’s talent and manipulation of her image had managed to overcome the male rocker anxiety over female sexuality that contributed to the downfall of the disco craze.

Moreover, John Rockwell, critic of rock and classical music, acknowledged *Bad Girls* as the record that “gained her a firm foothold with a black audience that had heretofore remained slightly suspicious.”<sup>80</sup> Summer attributed their suspicion to her absence in Germany in the late 1960s and early ‘70s. She explained, “I come from an unknown source for black people, having lived in Europe for eight years. Blacks are very protective of their rights and their sources, and very suspicious of anyone who has sold out. They can be hostile—they don’t beat you up; they just ignore you.”<sup>81</sup> It seems counterintuitive that the black community would grant Summer respect for embracing a genre that overtime had become a white-dominated manipulation of black music, but respect most likely came from Summer’s successful negotiation of a genre historically hostile to women and blacks.<sup>82</sup> More than just being recognized as a legitimate talent, however, Summer most likely gained the respect of African Americans, especially black women, through her commentary on prostitution—her recognition of a unique black

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<sup>79</sup> “Rock with a disco beat” quoted from Rockwell, “Fuses Rock and Disco”; most critical of her as a sexual creature is in reference to Holden, “Hot-to-Trot.”

<sup>80</sup> Rockwell, “Win Respect.”

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. See also Miller, “A Pipe to Share,” 24.

<sup>82</sup> In the 4 February 1980 issue of *People*, Peter Lester talks about the struggle Summer had trying to get an ABC television special after the release of her *Bad Girls* album: “‘I’m black first of all, and that has something to do with it,’ she says of the delay. ‘They didn’t know how they were going to get their money or their rating.’ She won them over, as it turned out, with a fiery performance at a convention of ABC’s station managers.” See Song section on page 91. For a persuasive discussion of how rock’s aesthetic had developed in a way that pushed blacks and women to the margins see Carolyn Krasnow, “The Development of Aesthetic Ideology in Popular Music: Rock and Disco in the Nineteen Seventies,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999).

sexuality, as well as the stereotypes surrounding it—and the fact that she had gained more control over her representations of female sexuality, both literally and figuratively. It was harder (although not impossible) for people to interpret Summer’s work on *Bad Girls* as merely the representation of an animalistic sex object produced by men, as some interpreted her early work. Thus, in a society that traditionally viewed black women as promiscuous sexual creatures, many in the black community could respect Summer’s new, more confident and controlled—but still complex—representation of her sexuality as a black woman.

By the fall of 1980, with the release of *The Wanderer*, Donna Summer had reached the status of true rock princess, but she still had not broken free from her sexy disco image. Her “Greatest Hits” album, *On the Radio*, reached number one the prior fall, making her the first female artist in history to have three number one singles and two number one albums within a twelve-month period and substantiating her overwhelming popularity.<sup>83</sup> It combined two new singles, including a long-play disco duet with venerable diva Barbara Streisand, with all the old standbys—from the sexiest “Love to Love You Baby” to the innocent “I Love You” from *Once Upon A Time* and the assertive and rock-infused “Hot Stuff.”<sup>84</sup> Critics praised *The Wanderer*, her first release under the new management of Geffen Records, as solidifying Summer’s transition to rock.<sup>85</sup> Even Dave Marsh, formative editor of the rock magazine *Creem* and consummate adherent to rock’s need for “authenticity” and rebellion, wrote in *Rolling Stone* that she sang chords

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<sup>83</sup> Josiah Howard, *Donna Summer: Her Life and Music* (Cranberry Township, PA: Tiny Ripple Books, 2003), 109.

<sup>84</sup> *On the Radio*, compact disc (PolyGram Records, 1979), Casablanca Records, P2 22558.

<sup>85</sup> Donna sued Casablanca records in January 1980 for what amounted to unethical management practices (her manager at the time was Joyce Bogart – wife of Neil Bogart, the company’s president), and became the first artist to sign with the Geffen label. Jim Haskins and J.M. Stifle, *Donna Summer: An Unauthorized Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1983), 112-113. Also see relevant coverage in *Billboard* and *Record World*.

that she “punches across as the ultimate Anglo-rock singer.” Fitting with Summer’s chameleon-like identity, which she was always certain to complement with the appropriate style of quick-change vocals, Marsh also described *The Wanderer* as “the album where Summer’s fascinations—with dance rhythms, rock and roll, Christianity, and the degradations of street life—coalesce.” Indeed, Marsh explicitly recognized the fact that Summer had a strong hand in the multivalent identity of her career, commenting on the album’s exceptionally smooth collaborative production with Summer as the “controlling center.”<sup>86</sup> Summer played a “tough rocker” and included her personal composition, “I Believe in Jesus,” on the same album, yet there remained room for at least one critic—Stephen Holden, again—to find the same “space-age sexpot,” “caterwauling street kitten,” and “breathless little girl” that had defined Summer’s image since she hit the American stage in 1975.<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

While never wholly fulfilling her sex goddess image, even in the very beginning of her American career, Donna Summer also never completely escaped it. As long as her success was associated with disco fame, people would identify her with the genre and the sexy anthems that went along with it. But the conflicting images that made up Summer’s music and press were, most likely, the right blend of sexiness, assertiveness, submission and romance to change her albums consistently from vinyl to gold throughout the 1970s. The inconsistencies in her image and presentations seemed to blend naturally with the

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<sup>86</sup> Dave Marsh, “A Rock & Roll Road Map of Donna Summer’s Soul,” review of *The Wanderer*, *Rolling Stone*, 19 March 1981; Dave Marsh, “Rating Recent Rock Releases,” *Washington Post*, 2 January 1981. For more on Dave Marsh see Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan, “Modeling Authenticity, Authenticating Commercial Models,” in *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 17-36.

<sup>87</sup> Stephen Holden, Riffs, “Donna Summer, Pop Magdalen,” *Village Voice*, 26 November-2 December 1980, 67.

social fractures of the historical moment. Even after her conversion to born-again Christianity at the end of the decade, Donna Summer continued to combine an assertive, self-determined female sexuality with more conservative notions of femininity. At a time when the outbreak of AIDS seriously stunted the disco dancing and free sex lifestyle, the rise of religious right was presenting such misfortune as the wages of sexual sin, and American society was turning against feminist “superwomen,” Donna Summer’s fans could continue to interpret her music in ways that best spoke to their own individual sensibilities. Similarly malleable representations of sexuality by disco stars like Sylvester and the Village People helped to make the cultural politics of gay liberation appealing to a mainstream audience that might have otherwise rejected such expression.

## Chapter 7

### **“I Am What I Am”: How Disco’s Gay Roots Influenced Its Mainstream Form**

Near the end of his 1978 *Cosmopolitan* article on the disco explosion, Barry Cunningham tells the story of Carole Price, a twenty-nine-year-old computer programmer from Long Island. Price had become tired of evenings spent at home and decided to check out the disco scene she had been hearing so much about:

I was at loose ends, y’know. I couldn’t face another night of yogurt and Johnny Carson. So I said, “What the hell. I’ll get dressed up and go dancing.” I’d heard Disco was one thing a girl could do alone without necessarily looking like a pickup. So I put on what I thought was a super white dress, high sandals, and drove up to New York. I’d heard great things about one place.

Well, I was inside for two minutes, and I wanted to die. All these men in leather boots. Shaved heads. Tattoos. They all danced with one another, shoved coke in each other’s noses. There were big neon phallic symbols on the walls. No one knew I was even *there*. Except maybe for the two guys who mistook me for a transvestite.<sup>1</sup>

Price had found herself inside a gay disco catering to a “leatherman” clientele, a club that continued the tradition of disco as an integral space within the gay liberation movement, but on which Cunningham refused to elaborate. His only comments: “We won’t dwell on clubs like this one, a warehouse disco in lower Manhattan, except to say that they *are* part of the Disco Scene: mass body factories where bizarre connections are made against the frankly sordid décor.”<sup>2</sup> He went on to advise readers about the importance of knowing what type of disco they’d be visiting before arriving. In an article otherwise devoted to

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<sup>1</sup> Price quoted in Barry Cunningham, “Discorama,” *Cosmopolitan*, September 1978, 225.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



exploring the variety and contradictions within the disco phenomenon, the author passed over the kind of discos that were direct descendents of the scene's origins.

Cunningham certainly was not the only author of the disco craze to be evasive about its connections to gay culture. Of all the instructional and descriptive books published about disco dancing and culture that I referenced for this dissertation, only a handful make any reference to the topic's history in the gay community. Most simply ignore it, choosing to fill their pages with any number of other disco-relevant topics. Others address the history obliquely by talking about the Village People as a gay group and describing disco's origins "in black, Hispanic, and far-out communities in the early 1970s."<sup>3</sup> The situation was mildly better in the periodical press. Many journalists reporting on the early years of "discomania" readily gave credit to the gay community for being at the vanguard of the disco trend, but such acknowledgement lost significant ground after the *Saturday Night Fever* effect. In the post-*Saturday Night Fever* glut on the market, when most attention was paid to bringing new recruits to the disco cause, only the rare newspaper or magazine article outside of the trade or gay press devoted significant space to disco's gay history. Those becoming familiar with disco only in its mass cultural form would be hard pressed to understand it as an outgrowth of the gay underground if they were not associated with that community.

Yet, no matter how removed mainstream disco became from its formerly underground roots, the connection was never completely severed. Indeed, as Gillian

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<sup>3</sup> Quote taken from Ronald W. Lackmann, *Disco! Disco! Disco! A Guide to Disco Dancing* (Middletown, CT: Xerox Education Publications, 1980), 13. Other disco books that at least hint at disco's gay origins are Abe Peck and Suzy Rice, eds., *Dancing Madness* (New York: Anchor Press, 1976); Kitty Hanson, *Disco Fever* (New York: New American Library, 1978); Albert Goldman, *Disco* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1978); and Brian Sheratt and Nalani M. Leong, *Disco Chic: All the Styles, Steps, and Places to Go* (New York: Harmony Books, 1979). Randy Deats (in collaboration with Laurie Devine), *Dancing Disco* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979), addresses the gay connections through the Village People.

Frank has shown, the backlash contingent amplified disco's homosexual connection in order to disparage its affect on heterosexual masculinity.<sup>4</sup> Disco provided the soundtrack to, venues for, and cultural expression of gay liberation; in turn, gay liberation was a vital social change movement that fed the mainstream disco explosion. The gay element of disco mania was always only just below the surface in the mainstream success of acts like Sylvester and the Village People, and the ways in which the disco environment promoted sexual freedom while at the same time challenging the traditional understanding of sexual roles and expectations were indebted to the ways gay liberation and the women's movement redefined sexual revolution. Indeed, even as Cunningham tried to downplay the significance of gay disco, his mere mention of it suggests its influence on disco's popularity with non-gays. Price chose the disco she did because she had "heard great things" about it. Gay discos were still popular and talked about, with other clubs trying to recreate their energy for a straight audience. Moreover, that Price chose to go out dancing because she had "heard Disco was one thing a girl could do alone without necessarily looking like a pickup" is evidence that disco served as a sexualized social space in which gender interactions were being redefined for both men and women. Even at its most commercialized, disco maintained connections to its loyal gay audience and offered a message of individuality and freedom that appealed to a broad base.

This chapter explores these connections by closely analyzing the ways in which disco's foundation in a politics of pleasure was adopted by and adapted for a more

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<sup>4</sup> Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, No. 2 (May 2007): 276-306. Nadine Hubbs also notes how "homophobia" in the context of the disco backlash was a broad kind that went beyond fear of known homosexuals to include also "the far greater phenomenon of fear and loathing towards any perceived aura of homosexuality . . . in a culture in which knowledge of actual homosexuals and homosexuality was taboo, avoided and denied." See Hubbs, "'I Will Survive': Musical Mappings of Queer Social Space in a Disco Anthem," *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 232.

expansive audience. I begin with a brief discussion of the disco scene as a whole, showing how the message of sexual freedom put into practice in gay underground discos made mixed discos attractive to straights and the disco atmosphere attractive to young singles coming to terms with new sexual rules. I then transition into a detailed analysis of the most apparent expressions of gay liberation's influence within mainstream disco—Sylvester and the Village People. Previous scholars have offered sustained analysis of Sylvester as a uniting icon of the gay community in San Francisco's Castro district and his music as representative of disco's politics of pleasure for gay men.<sup>5</sup> I add to the discussion by treating him as a disco star with a mainstream audience as well, considering the ways in which he encouraged a redefinition of gender ideals through his music, image, and promotion of individuality. The Village People, on the other hand, while also promoting gay liberation in the guise of individuality and freedom, have been generally dismissed by scholars of disco. The most extended discussion given them has been a mere three pages written by Peter Shapiro who first admonishes them as the “nadir of mainstream disco.”<sup>6</sup> For all the ink spilt on the Village People during their disco heyday, they deserve more nuanced analysis. Whether or not they were the worst mainstream disco had to offer aesthetically should not matter as much as what they meant to disco culture in terms of their representations of gender and sexuality, which I hope to deconstruct.

The gay liberation message of these two disco acts was often muted and malleable, making it popular with both gays and straights because of the ways various

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<sup>5</sup> Joshua Gamson, *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005) and Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 75-78.

<sup>6</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 223.

groups could interpret it differently to meet their own needs. Such mutability was especially significant for how disco navigated what Shapiro calls its “problematic relationship with masculinity.”<sup>7</sup> While women and gay men consistently made up disco’s largest fan base, the entertainment form—Sylvester and Village People included—would not have reached its massive heights of popularity without the support of straight men. Nor would its backlash have been so virulent had there not been something threatening to this same group in its content. The ways in which disco culture remained connected to its gay roots but worked around them in the mainstream is central to this “problematic relationship.” Disco brought facets of gay life and expression into the American mainstream in significant ways, and this chapter explores how and why such ideas were represented to mainstream American society and how they interacted with ideas of masculinity within this time period. Although disco’s success in the mainstream depended on the creative suppression (or at times complete removal) of disco’s roots as an underground gay phenomenon, blanketing its aboveground image in the rhetoric of individuality and universality gave disco subversive potential that was creatively manipulated and uniquely appropriated to appeal to an audience of widely divergent masculine and sexual viewpoints.

### **Disco as Sexual Freedom: Linking a Gay Underground to a Straight Mainstream**

That the movement of disco from underground to mainstream brought many straights into contact with gay culture suggested disco was a cultural expression of how far tolerance for homosexuality had developed. As Virginia DeMoss, writer for the gay rights periodical *The Advocate*, said in the later years of disco’s popularity, “For once gays are not only being accepted on their own terms, but straights are coming to them,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 231.

asking to be let in.”<sup>8</sup> Especially in New York, gay and straight patrons mixed in discos that were steadily becoming more visible to the aboveground media and curious party crowd. As journalist and gay cultural critic Vito Russo once quipped in 1975, “Everyone seems to be discussing the big disco boom in New York these days. The *Village Voice* has just done a cover story on the subject, indicating that discos are at least as popular as that paper’s two recent cover stories which concerned gay people. In New York, you can’t find a disco without gay people, and vice versa, so I guess it’s all the same story.”<sup>9</sup> In Washington, D.C., warehouse discos were known to attract large crowds that were about seventy-five percent gay, meaning a quarter of those patrons were not, and were straights who chose to attend predominantly gay discos instead of the smaller spots “sell[ing] a more subdued brand of disco-going to straight college, young professionals.”<sup>10</sup> In Atlanta, discos patronized almost exclusively by gays during the week got crowded on weekends when straights came out.<sup>11</sup> The mixing that occurred in major urban discos suggests a kind of success for gay liberation, and the fact that the opening of straight discos grew out of the broad appeal of a disco atmosphere once reserved only for gays, blacks, and those “in the know” was not insignificant; it suggested a growing openness in larger society to sexual expression of all kinds as a result of various liberation movements.

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<sup>8</sup> Virginia DeMoss, “Disco: From High Camp to High Tech Gay Got It All Together,” *The Advocate*, 25 January 1979, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Vito Russo, “Disco New York,” *The Advocate*, 13 August 1975, 47. Also see Sally Helgesen, “Disco: Phosphorescent Shapes Pass through the Night, Leaving Nothing Behind,” *Harper’s*, October 1977, which explores the disco craze in terms of why straight people enjoy gay clubs.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Zito, “Anything’s Cool at the Discos,” *Washington Post*, 17 October 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Steve Warrant, “Disco Update: Atlanta,” *The Advocate*, 7 April 1976. Also see Jean Williams, “Gay Dancers Add to Excitement of Disco Boom,” *Billboard*, 17 May 1975, which talks about straights coming to gay clubs in Los Angeles, and Lynn Van Matre, “Secure Sexuality . . . and the Scene sells,” *Chicago Tribune*, 7 April 1974, which talks about similar changes at Chicago gay discos.

This is not to say, however, that mixed discos signaled an uncomplicated acceptance of homosexuality. As we saw in chapter one, the dancing and glitter of mixed discos was as much about the performance of bisexual chic as it was any inherent or far-reaching change in straight society's construction of homosexuality as deviant. It allowed straights to commoditize gayness and feign acceptance by making homosexuality a playful and chic lifestyle choice, rather than addressing it as a real, and still dangerous, sexual choice. Moreover, being involved in gay disco remained an unpopular choice within straight society, even for those sympathetic to the scene. A local club owner in Washington, D.C., wanted to buy the successful gay club, Pier Nine, but refrained from doing so, saying, "I was worried that my son's classmates might find out and start saying to him, 'Your Daddy runs a faggot bar.'"<sup>12</sup> Heterosexual participation in a previously underground gay disco scene was not about an unmitigated triumph of gay liberation, but it did represent a generation trying to put into practice the tenets of individuality, freedom, and authentic expression that had defined the movements of the 1960s.

In a time when sexual expression was ubiquitous in much of American culture, forcing people to come to terms with how they understood their own sexuality, the gay disco scene attracted young straights in large part because its atmosphere provided a safe space tolerant of free and uninhibited self-expression. "Against the wall a couple is kissing very seriously, the man's hand under the girl's dress. Two men in short pants and tank shirts are holding hands. People are dancing on the bar stools. A man walks around the bar, juts his hips every few steps and rubs his groin," was how *Washington Post* staff writer Tom Zito, described the scene at Pier Nine (which was gradually becoming more

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<sup>12</sup> As quoted in Zito, "Anything's Cool."

mixed).<sup>13</sup> Because gay discos were an arena of their liberation, gay men practiced an open and uninhibited sexuality as part of their disco culture. They were not ashamed of expressing their sexuality in graphic ways deemed inappropriate in the dominant reality of the everyday mainstream, and the mixing of sexual proclivities that occurred as straights caught on to the scene served as cultural evidence of how the sexual revolution and gay liberation had opened minds to a variety of sexual lifestyles and expressions. A straight man explained why he liked gay discos in just those terms: “We come here because we’re into bodies. We like sensuality and sexuality. We can do things on the dance floor here, or sitting around the bar, that would stop the show at other places. It’s relaxed here ‘cause everybody figures the next person is just as kinky as you.”<sup>14</sup> This couple and other straights like them were attracted to the high level of energy that came from the uninhibited sexuality of the gay disco scene, described as relaxed and casual, seriously committed to dancing, with an atmosphere that combined “outrageousness, decadence, romanticism, opulence, sexuality and intrigue.”<sup>15</sup> The uninhibited nature of gay revelry “seem[ed] to represent the unspoken approval straights need to loosen up a little, let go and get a little crazy” and created a general connection between sexuality and discotheques.<sup>16</sup>

As such, mainstream disco was a cultural production that a younger generation used to come to terms with the sexual revolution that had made them more aware of and comfortable with sexuality in all its various forms. “What my old man doesn’t understand is that you don’t have to be a fag to be into this scene,” said Tony Pagano of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> DeMoss, “High Camp to High Tech,” 28. Also see, Frank Reardon, “Gay Strength: New York Club Patrons Loyal; Unaffected by Faddy Trends,” *Billboard*, 4 March 1978.

Staten Island during a night at Le Jardin in 1975. “My old man,” he continued, “doesn’t understand that dancing is not a tight-assed, uptight sex-role scene. It’s just a way of communicating with people you might not have anything to say to if you sat down to talk. It doesn’t mean you want to fuck a broad or a guy if you dance with them. You’re just doing what comes natural.”<sup>17</sup> Pagano’s “old man” represented those people of an older generation who understood dancing as ballroom dancing—with its strictly designated roles for men and women and often unmasculine connotations for men—and disco as an exclusively gay scene and who were leery of it because of that correlation. But Tony and other straights who patronized these discotheques, willingly mixing with homosexuality, did not see its gay origins and early majority as a threat to their own sexual identity. There were certain limits to the cultural acceptance of these open-minded disco youths—Tony wouldn’t necessarily find common ground with gay men or lesbians if they “sat down to talk”—but on the dance floor, at least, they had come to accept the concepts of movements like sexual revolution and gay liberation that promoted sexuality as fluid and expressive, something that should not be confined to rigid and prescribed roles for each gender and that need not be only about performance and orgasm, but rather, should be about (freedom of) expression in the larger sense.

Indeed, in the early days of disco’s aboveground recognition, *New York* magazine praised the scene for the way it had broken out of age-old gender conventions:

Omnisexuality is not considered freaky in the 1974 discotheque. The first time two men rush over and plant one on each other’s lips, don’t be surprised. Even though you thought, this time, you’d actually found a straight place. Not all men dancing together are gay. Women have been allowed to dance together since gym

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<sup>17</sup> Tony Pagano quoted in Ed McCormack, “In which a Suburban Prole Decadent Does Battle With a Hot Midtown Manhattan Discotheque,” *Rolling Stone*, 28 August 1975, 42.



class days, but men without dates had to lurk around the bar. Now it doesn't matter.<sup>18</sup>

The sexual flexibility and “bisexual chic” that attracted straights to disco in the first half of the 1970s, while readily critiqued, was an important factor in how the changes of the era had opened sexual expression, and the suppleness of sexual expression was a central and lasting tenet of disco culture. Mixed clubs remained some of the most famous discos of the decade, especially in New York City where clubs like Studio 54, Infinity, Xenon, and New York, New York garnered much media attention and constantly reminded the American public about disco's relation to sexuality and sexual freedom.

Statistically speaking, however, mixed clubs were a small minority of the thousands of clubs that sprung up around the country after 1974, most of which remained segregated, gay or straight.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the straight clubs that made up the majority of dance spaces by the latter half of the disco era came from the same impetus of sexual revolution that had informed gay liberation and gay disco. “Indeed, the relationship between the popularization of disco and liberated attitudes toward life-styles should not be minimized,” said New York correspondent Clarke Taylor in describing the disco craze for the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>20</sup> According to another *Los Angeles Times* report, “simulated orgy” was “that most essential ingredient” in the disco mix, and a *Forbes* feature on “discomania” opened with the following quote: “It's flaunting your sexuality. People are getting their sexuality up front, out in the open.”<sup>21</sup> Certainly, this sexuality was toned down in certain areas and over time as the industry's growth made profits possible by

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Jacobson, “Hollyw-o-o-o-d! The Return of the New York Disco,” *New York*, 1 July 1974, 51.

<sup>19</sup> “In some of the finer New York discos both gays and straights (in an effort to be chic) attend the same disco, a phenomenon that has not yet spread to the rest of the country.” Dwight Russ, “Disco: Environmental Mind Seduction,” *Soul*, 6 June 1977, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Clarke Taylor, “New York Alive with the Sound of Disco,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 August 1977.

<sup>21</sup> Jack Slater, “Discotheques Dance to Another Tune,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 August 1976; comment garnered by journalist for “Discomania,” *Forbes*, 1 June 1976, 47.

appealing to all audiences, but creating discos for kids, families, or more conservative dancers did not negate the fact that most discos catered to a young single crowd that saw disco as a way to experiment with the new rules and atmosphere of a world defined by sexual revolution.

Both men and women went to the disco understanding that it held the possibility of meeting and making with the opposite sex, and while it was often the case that men did most of the looking and asking, discos were spaces where women also exercised their new sexual awareness and did the initiating. Moreover, as much variety and confusion that made up the larger sexual landscape also made up the disco scene, with some men and women willingly engaging in casual sex and others looking for more lasting emotional connections.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, even teenage discos were inundated with notions and activities resultant from the influence of sexual revolution in American society. Girls did the asking, bare skin was de rigueur, and “full-blown positions of teen passion” could be witnessed in the balconies. Teen discos may have had “a decidedly reassuring, wholesome” character that reminded one author of the 1950s, but skin-bearing fashions and making out in the balcony would have found no place at a 1950s high school record hop.<sup>23</sup> And unlike the discotheques of the 1960s where jet-setting singles twisted the night away and women in miniskirts and go-go boots put themselves on display to be picked up by male sexual predators, discos of the 1970s were places where men and women of all walks of life could exercise their personal understandings of a new sexual order. They could find a club that fit their individual sexual proclivities—straight, gay or

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<sup>22</sup> For examples of such sexual variety within the disco scene, see Mimi Ginott and Scott Harris, “Singles Scene: Mating Game Played in Discos, Bars,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 September 1979; Ari L. Goldman, “A New Look for the Disco,” *New York Times*, 26 December 1976.

<sup>23</sup> Quotes about teen disco taken from Deats, *Dancing Disco*, 142, 144. For other descriptions, see Edwin Miller, “Discomania,” *Seventeen*, February 1979.

mixed, outrageous and erotic or sedate and conservative—and use that disco as a testing ground to find their place in the new and confusing sexual order of the time. No matter the sexual proclivity represented or practiced in each individual discotheque, disco as a whole was undeniably representative of the public and commercial sexual culture that defined America since at least the 1960s.

The music of the disco scene played a central role in providing disco with its atmosphere of public sexuality, and because most mainstream discotheques accommodated gays or straights, not both, the music of the movement was even more important than the spaces when it came to bringing the message of gay liberation to the masses. The music was more than merely danceable, which in itself could conjure up sexual sensations; much of it explicitly referenced sex, and DJs played it in the discotheques in a way that simulated the build up and peaks of a sexual encounter. The modern sound technology, stimulating light shows, and plush décor of most 1970s discotheques, combined with a crowd of dancers caught up in the call to sexual expression, came together to make dancing to disco music more compellingly sexual than even listening to it on the radio. As described in *Soul* magazine, “The new crop of sex-directed singles take on an awesome, hypnotically suggestive quality when the setting is a discotheque.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the fact that “most songs omit any references to ‘he’ or ‘she,’” made them “easily acceptable to either sex.”<sup>25</sup> It also made them generally accessible to any sexual orientation, and suggested stories of alternative sexuality or at least the possibility thereof. Disco music was about sex and was played in a manner that

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<sup>24</sup> Russ, “Environmental Mind Seduction,” 4.

<sup>25</sup> DeMoss, “High Camp to High Tech,” 27.

simulated and suggested sex, but it also was centrally important to how the elements of gay liberation and disco's gay roots were incorporated into its mainstream form.

Rock, as the dominant sound in pop music before the disco deluge, was not attuned to the struggles and ideals of gay liberation in the same ways that would make disco central to its politics. Whether through a boastful and phallic masculine sexuality or one that was more emotional, both cock rock and teenybop rock made heterosexual relations their central plotline.<sup>26</sup> Neither spoke to the desires of gay men seeking pride in sex with other men. Perhaps rock indirectly addressed gay themes, but it was rarely through anything but creative interpretation, and the rock scene lacked any out and proud gay stars.<sup>27</sup> "To this day I can't think of one rock artist who has been gay and proud, erotic and liberating," bemoaned Adam Block, a self-confessed "gay rocker," in a 1982 issue of *The Advocate*.<sup>28</sup> Glitter rock, in the early 1970s, seemed like the best possibility for an alliance between rock and gay liberation, but the genre was not popular with gay men themselves because it was too closely associated to the inauthentic performances of bisexual chic. Glitter rock also failed to gain widespread popularity in the mainstream.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Angela McRobbie with Simon Frith, "Rock and Sexuality," in Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 137-158 and Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), esp. 227-242.

<sup>27</sup> Randy Shilts, Pop Music, "Strictly Between the Lines," *The Advocate*, 7 April 1976. Even if the Rolling Stones sometimes wrote lyrics that one could interpret as sexually ambiguous, they themselves were not out, happy and proud. Indeed, music critics John Gill claims, "Both Jagger and Morrison have been hailed [both positively and negatively] for their sexual ambiguity, although at this remove it is difficult to discern anything but heterosexual themes in any of their recordings, performances, or statements," going on to say that if a queer subtext can be discerned in 1960s rock it was most likely only to attract a larger fanbase through scandalization of the media and appeal to gay fantasies. See John Gill, *Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 99-100. Also see Sheila Whiteley, "Little Red Rooster v. The Honkey Tonk Woman: Mick Jagger, Sexuality, Style and Image," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. by Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 67-99.

<sup>28</sup> Adam Block, "The Confessions of a Gay Rocker," *The Advocate*, 15 April 1982, 43-44.

<sup>29</sup> Block, "The Confessions of a Gay Rocker"; John DeVoe, Pop Music, "What's Gay About It?" *The Advocate*, 7 April 1976.

Disco, however, was immensely popular with gay men because of how it created a discourse of liberation and sexuality that resonated with their movement, and, as we saw in chapter one, acted in many ways as a driving force of the movement. The female divas who dominated the disco songbook not only continued a tradition of gay men worshipping female performers; they sang of fantasies and pleasures with which gay men could identify.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, they did so to a musical sound that moved beyond the phallic-centrism of rock, allowing dancers to revel in a politics of pleasure that broke the mold of traditional penetrative sexuality.<sup>31</sup> Of course, disco was not popular with all gay men, and those who preferred rock came out in defense of rock's homosexual aspects and in attack of what they saw as disco's inherent conformity, not to mention the profusion of disco music in gay culture that suggested rock fandom and homosexuality were not compatible.<sup>32</sup> Yet, Adam Block admitted that "disco did in fact represent a kind of rebellion" and desire "to subvert the social order." It was just that "disco intended to beat society at its own game: flaunting the rewards that ads had always promised as the hallmarks of success (luxury, beauty, sex), while refusing to pay the price of abandoning faggotry."<sup>33</sup> Disco was a way for gay men to practice pleasure in ways that a hetero-dominant society had previously denied them.

The music and culture that resonated so strongly with gay liberation also opened the doors for a more explicit musical link with homosexuality. In 1978, Carl Bean put

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<sup>30</sup> Block, "Confessions of a Gay Rocker" and Mitchell Morris, "It's Raining Men: The Weather Girls, Gay Subjectivity, and the Erotics of Insatiability," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, eds. Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley (Los Angeles: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999), 213-229.

<sup>31</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, 246, borrowing from Richard Dyer's 1979 article "In Defense of Disco," reprinted in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Howard Klein, "'They're Playing Our Song': Rock Grooves on Gay," *The Advocate*, 19 April 1978; Block, "Confessions of a Gay Rocker"; Jerry Berbiar, Opinions, "Rock On," *The Advocate*, 24 June 1982; T.A. Smithe, Opinions, "Rock On," *The Advocate*, 24 June 1982.

<sup>33</sup> Block, "The Confessions of a Gay Rocker," 46.

out the gay pride song “I Was Born this Way,” which Motown records hoped would become “a national rallying song for the Gay Rights movement.”<sup>34</sup> The song had success on the disco charts only, but it was a clear and direct statement about being gay and being proud, showing how commercial disco could still speak to that audience. More successful in their attempts to bridge the disco and pop charts were Sylvester and the Village People. Sylvester was an out and proud gay star whose lyrics never specifically addressed the subject but who also never denied his sexual orientation, even if he was convinced it should have little to do with his professional success. The gay community claimed the Village People as their own, at least until the group’s commercial success altered their approach. While its message was only very rarely a straightforward call for homosexual tolerance and rights, disco music was especially important to gay men because it resonated with the challenges, triumphs, and emotions of gay life and filled a void, which until that time had been left empty by most pop music. Moreover, a sense of universality, which creatively covered over the politics in which Sylvester and the Village People participated, helped make this gay-oriented music popular with a variety of gender and sexual sensibilities.

### **Sylvester Redefines “Real”**

Disco’s openly gay star, Sylvester, born Sylvester James in 1947, began performing gospel in the church at a young age and had a history as a cult performer before making it big in the disco arena. Between 1970 and 1973, he starred as part of San

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<sup>34</sup> Judith Spiegelman, “Carl Bean: Gay National Anthem?” *Soul*, 27 March 1978, 4. Also reported in Daniel Conlon, “Carl Bean Was ‘Born This Way,’” *The Advocate*, 19 April 1978. The song was exclusive to the disco/dance charts and did not crossover to Pop, R&B or any other *Billboard* singles chart; it debuted 28 January 1978; peaked at #15; and was on the chart for eight weeks. Interestingly, the same song was released in 1975, by Valentino, also with Motown, but at that time “Motown’s promotional efforts for the record were minimal.” See rojo, “Valentino Would Do It Again,” *The Advocate*, 7 April 1976, 32.

Francisco's cross-dressing theatrical troupe the Cockettes and spent the mid-1970s on the fringes of the glitter rock scene.<sup>35</sup> "With the coming of disco, events and trends ha[d] conspired to bring him acceptance," and his first hits on the disco charts included "Down, Down, Down," "Over and Over," "Dance (Disco Heat)," and "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)." The latter two also cracked the pop Top 40.<sup>36</sup> By the end of 1978 and into 1979, Sylvester was "playing mostly in what he calls 'straight places,'" performing in venues as mainstream as the Roseland and Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* and winning accolades like *Billboard*'s Best Male Disco Artist award.<sup>37</sup> "He may never be truly mainstream," claimed Connie Johnson in the *Los Angeles Times*, "but Sylvester's style—and acceptance—have grown beyond 'cult' proportions."<sup>38</sup> And compared to the straight-laced, highly segregated atmosphere that once defined shows like *American Bandstand*, Sylvester was an indication that the American mainstream had embraced elements of the social movements of previous eras to at least some extent.<sup>39</sup> It is for this reason that Sylvester deserves a place in this study of mainstream disco. His penetration of the disco market, as an openly homosexual man with a tendency to dress in outrageous costumes of ballgowns and boas, is significant in that it epitomized disco's mantra of celebrating personal expression and suggested that even commercial disco held elements that transgressed the gender and sexual system that had traditionally structured society.

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<sup>35</sup> For more information on these parts of Sylvester's performing career, see Gamson, *Fabulous Sylvester*.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Cromelin, "Sylvester: Disco, Soul at Roxy," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 December 1978. Dance/Disco chart positions taken from Joel Whitburn, *Joel Whitburn's Hot Dance/Disco 1974-2003* (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, 2004). Top 40 chart position references *Billboard* Hot 100 and taken from Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits* (New York: Billboard Books, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> John Rockwell, "The Pop Life," *New York Times*, 25 May 1979. Also see Robert Christgau, "Sylvester Is a Star," *Village Voice*, 11 June 1979; Lynn Van Matre, "Sylvester Sails in on the Disco Wave," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 November 1978; People Picks and Pans: Sylvester, *Stars, People*, 11 June 1979.

<sup>38</sup> Connie Johnson, "Sylvester: Music for Happy Feet," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 February 1980.

<sup>39</sup> For more on the history of *American Bandstand*, see John A. Jackson, *American Bandstand: Dick Clark and the Making of a Rock 'n' Roll Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Sylvester's androgyny and sexual preference aside, critics praised his music as some of the best disco had to offer. Various journalists described Sylvester's music as "a grinding mixture of disco and R&B, spiritually-tinged and funky," "hard rocking dance music," and "nothing if not innovative."<sup>40</sup> At the same time, it met the needs of a disco audience in search of extended ecstasy through music and dance with its "raucous, steamy rave-ups with the sort of delirious builds and propulsive productions that inspire disco crowds to peaks of frenzy."<sup>41</sup> His music was heavy on the synthesized, sex-drenched, Eurodisco elements, but it was also a sound that critics recognized as maintaining a distinct connection to disco's R&B roots.<sup>42</sup> *Black Stars* talked about how "Sylvester successfully blends jazz, gospel, rock and a lot of soul into all of the tunes," and even disco detractor Nelson George called his music "as fine an r&b-disco presentation as has reached the New York area this year."<sup>43</sup> If Sylvester contributed to R&B's masculinity deficit, as described by George, it had to do with much more than the instrumentation of the music itself.<sup>44</sup>

Beyond the instrumentation, however, was Sylvester's "astonishingly impressive falsetto."<sup>45</sup> While certainly not without precedent, his falsetto combined with his open homosexuality gave Sylvester's music a meaning that celebrated the transgression of boundaries in a way specific to the 1970s and disco. Sylvester did not merely enter an otherworld between masculine and feminine with his falsetto; he actually took on the

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<sup>40</sup> Lisa Collins, "Nobody Does It Like Sylvester," *Sepia*, August 1979, 49; Julie Ellis, "Let's Talk—Music," *Black Stars*, January 1981, 33; Roberta Morgan, *Disco* (New York: Bell Publishing, 1979), 43.

<sup>41</sup> Vince Aletti, "Sylvester Isn't Strange At All," *Village Voice*, 28 December 1978, 93.

<sup>42</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 76.

<sup>43</sup> Ellis, "Let's Talk—Music," 33; Nelson George, Talent In Action, Sylvester, GQ, Big Foot at the Felt Forum, New York, *Billboard*, 22 March 1980, 37.

<sup>44</sup> See Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), esp. chp. 6, and discussion of George in Alice Echols, "'Shaky Ground': Popular Music in the Disco Years," in *Shaky Ground: The '60s and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 187.

<sup>45</sup> Morgan, *Disco*, 43.



female role with it. Music writer Connie Johnson once described Sylvester's falsetto as "scarily womanish," and it was so successful as an expression of gender transgression critics compared his vocals with female disco singers rather than male.<sup>46</sup> Unlike "the typical falsetto 'love man' [who] sings in a woman's normal register but has no interest in her normal dramatic breadth," Sylvester sang like a woman in order to be like a woman, to access "the human gamut of a woman's feelings."<sup>47</sup> According to music writer Mike Freedberg, Sylvester was the epitome of "the male falsetto taken so seriously and radically it entails dual sexuality," and this quality allowed his music to convey feeling that was more whole than non-falsettoists.

Not only could his use of falsetto speak to the conflicted emotions of being part of a marginal community; it also allowed Sylvester to express the broader aspects of love and sexuality by experiencing them on a dual level. Compared to the "macho-romantic figures" of the "baritone lover," against which the radical falsetto was in constant competition, falsettos "expressed the unbearable tension and fullness of pleasure" while the baritones "conceive[d] love as a rather one-dimensional experience."<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, if Barry White played "the ladies game" with his syrupy strings and references to romantic love, the overall impression of his music remained that of a macho lover concerned with his own experience rather than the combined experience of two lovers. In contrast, a falsetto like Sylvester's and the dual sexuality it conveyed, allowed the disco star to be a man, singing as a woman, exploring the depths of making love with

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<sup>46</sup> Connie Johnson, "Sylvester Swaggers," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March 1983. Aletti, "Sylvester Isn't Strange"; Christgau, "Sylvester Is a Star."

<sup>47</sup> Christgau, "Sylvester Is a Star," 73.

<sup>48</sup> Mike Freedberg, "Tony Washington and Sylvester," *Soul*, 26 September 1977, 6, 13, 19. Freedberg also argues that "His singing comes across as truth, and survives the mistaken commerciality of his backing music" (19).

another man—it was a complex and tension-riddled expression of love and one filled with the possibility for variable meanings depending on the audience. Other male R&B singers had incorporated falsetto into their repertoire to express the tensions of love without necessarily denuding R&B of its masculinity. Sylvester’s openly gay persona, however, gave his falsetto a different meaning and made his music more threatening to this masculine tradition. That he could be open about his homosexuality in the 1970s, as compared to a radical falsettoist like Little Richard, who camouflaged his sexuality in the 1950s mainstream, illustrates how disco culture represented a space of expressive possibility in the wake of social liberation movements.

As significant as Sylvester’s falsetto was, his onstage image quickly made him “a figure somewhat larger than his hits.”<sup>49</sup> His falsetto allowed him to take on the role of a woman through his voice, but his costumes put his gender bending on display visually. By the time Sylvester hit it big in the disco market, he had toned down his costumes somewhat. He had transitioned from the “silver-sequined dress, with slits up the side,” and what one husband-wife journalist pair described as “semi-nude drag outfits” of his glitter rock days, to what reviewers described as a “tamely outrageous” costume of “high-heeled black boots, narrow black pants, and a silver-sequined belted robe with a feather boa at the neck.”<sup>50</sup> When being interviewed on national television by Dick Clark, he toned it down further to a patterned, robe-like jacket, white button-down undone at the chest, and black leather pants. Yet, even then, he wore a long, curly-haired wig, necklace, earrings, and bracelets, and during his concerts, he was “decked out in enough

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<sup>49</sup> Collins, “Nobody Does It Like Sylvester,” 49.

<sup>50</sup> Patrick and Barbara Salvo, “Gay Queen of Rock,” *Sepia*, November 1974, 61; Aletti, “Sylvester Isn’t Strange,” 93; description “tamely outrageous” taken from Collins, “Nobody Does It Like Sylvester,” 49.

mascara and rouge to put Revlon out of business.”<sup>51</sup> He transformed from what most would consider drag queen (even transvestite) to something that was “androgynous rather than femme.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, in pictures, he tended to switch back and forth from male to female—from white suit and close-cropped natural to black caftan and turban with gold shimmer and earrings, from plain black shirt and pants to wig with black minidress—creating an image and persona that was, according to disco writer Vince Aletti, “deliberately bewildering.”<sup>53</sup>

Sylvester claimed that his transformation was something of a natural evolution; having “worn everything there is to wear,” he felt it was time to “slowly start to taper off.”<sup>54</sup> Others, interpreted the transition as a response to his entering the mainstream market and his “reluctan[ce] to be too outrageous in middle America.”<sup>55</sup> Yet, even in his toned down androgyny he presented an image that was much more transgressive in its gender bending than his heterosexual counterparts in the male disco scene. His open homosexuality perhaps limited the extent of his social subversion (straight men could still define themselves as “not gay” and “not feminine” in relation to Sylvester), and ultimately, Sylvester shied away from claiming any political motives behind his performance. But by framing his rhetoric in terms of individuality and universality, he was able to represent the pride of the gay community while bringing these homosexual

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<sup>51</sup> Description of interview with Dick Clark taken from image and text in Collins, “Nobody Does It Like Sylvester,” esp. 52. Make up comment from B.C., “Sylvester,” *Chicago Tribune*, 17 December 1978.

<sup>52</sup> Christgau, “Sylvester Is a Star,” 73.

<sup>53</sup> Aletti, “Sylvester Isn’t Strange,” 93.

<sup>54</sup> Sylvester quoted in John Schauer, “Sylvester: Sterling Talent Turns Gold into Platinum,” *The Advocate*, 25 January 1979, 32: “You know, I’ve done everything there is to do, I’ve worn everything there is to wear. I don’t like to repeat. . . . After you’ve worn all the feathers and all the jewels, you slowly start to taper off. . . . I never wanted to be classed as an old drag queen. I thought there’s a time to give that up when you’re still beautiful and you’re still lovely, so I started wearing costumes with trousers and then more casual clothes to where I am now—comfortable.”

<sup>55</sup> Christgau, “Sylvester Is a Star,” 73.

sensibilities into mainstream America, whether or not that audience understood or chose to be conscious of it as such.

As far as Sylvester was concerned, his sexuality and his professional life should be understood on separate terms; he argued that he was not sending any message with his music and that his sexuality was not important to his success (or failure) in the music business. Indeed, Sylvester claimed his musical ability and success as the reason why he could be openly gay, rather than the other way around: “What I do, I do well, and that’s basically the reason I can say I am gay. But I’m not selling my sexuality to make it.”<sup>56</sup> He wanted critics and audiences to appreciate him as a good musician, rather than a gay musician, and emphasized his music, rather than his lifestyle or even his costumes, during interviews. “He sees his costumes as theatrical contrivances that shouldn’t detract from his music,” wrote music critic John Rockwell, quoting Sylvester as saying, “My costumes for the show are *creations*. I don’t walk about in the streets in what I wear on stage.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, in explaining his relationship with other musical stars in the post-disco era, Sylvester explained that all that mattered was their musical relationship: “My sexuality or my colour has not been important at all,” he said.<sup>58</sup> As early as his days in glitter rock Sylvester claimed, “I have no great message to deliver to people. And I’m not concerned

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<sup>56</sup> Collins, “Nobody Does It Like Sylvester,” 53.

<sup>57</sup> John Rockwell, “The Pop Life,” *New York Times*, 25 May 1979. Also see Jason Winters, “Sylvester: A Disco Superstar Speaks Out!” *Black Stars*, May 1979, and Connie Johnson, “The Man behind the Fantasy: Sylvester,” *Black Stars*, June 1981, which talks about how Sylvester had a shy and quiet personality in contrast to his loud costumes.

<sup>58</sup> Malu Halasa, “Sylvester Unfrosted,” *Blues & Soul*, November 20–December 3, 1984, 19. Also see Douglas Price, “Sylvester,” *The Advocate*, 19 October 1977, 15, where Sylvester responds to “Why don’t [more gay entertainers] begin to speak out on issues concerning human rights and stop hiding in the closet?” by saying, “They must be scared, I guess—scared of the themselves of the publicity. It might hurt their careers, especially if they’re established from the past. But now it’s O.K. No one really cares. My God, look at me.” In some cases, even the press tried to play off his androgyny as inconsequential: According to *People*, San Francisco critic Joel Selvin once wrote, “Someone less kind might refer to Sylvester as a transvestite soul singer. Actually, he is just a guy who looks better dressed in women’s clothing.” See People Picks and Pans, *People*, 11 June 1979, 16, 18.

with being at the forefront of any revolution through music or any other means.”<sup>59</sup> He continued to maintain such a stance after becoming a disco star. According to Rockwell, “Sylvester doesn’t see himself as any sort of homosexual spokesman or symbol—‘It’s generally taken for granted, but I don’t bring it up,’ he says.”<sup>60</sup> Whether his true opinion or an attempt to move from cult theatrics to wider commercial viability, Sylvester downplayed the role his homosexuality served in his entertainment (which, in turn, downplayed the role the homosexual community had in making him a success).

Instead, he spoke and was presented in terms of individuality and universality, a strategy that fit well in the disco mold while at the same time separating androgyny from homosexuality and allowing his music to filter into the mainstream as different people interpreted it in different ways. In press articles, journalists pointed out, “Sylvester adds a universal message of pride and determination to the celebratory entertainment of his lighter pieces” and “he prizes his individuality.”<sup>61</sup> He valued his personal liberation, and proclaimed, “I am against discrimination on all levels, not just the gay level.”<sup>62</sup> During Sylvester’s concert at the Roseland, Memorial Day 1979, New York City radio personality Paco “introduced Sylvester with remarks equating disco and do-your-own-thing,” which mitigated the possible threat of Sylvester’s gender-bending image and allowed the diverse audience of “straight and gay, black and white and Latino and Oriental, formal and sloppy and party and drag and costume, singles and (often

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<sup>59</sup> Sylvester quoted in Salvo, “Gay Queen of Rock,” 62.

<sup>60</sup> John Rockwell, *The Pop Life*, *New York Times*, 25 May 1979. Also see Collins, “Nobody Does It Like Sylvester,” 53: “he’s not apt to wave any banners in gay politics. ‘If a group of people ever got together and put all their energies into one thing,’ he says, ‘politics would really have nothing to do with it.’”

<sup>61</sup> Cromelin, “Sylvester: Disco, Soul at Roxy”; Collins, “Nobody Does it Like Sylvester,” picture caption on p. 52.

<sup>62</sup> Price, “Sylvester,” 15. Also see Collins, “Nobody Does It Like Sylvester,” 53, where the author explains, “the idea of people judging people bothers him. ‘Or the idea of people ridiculously trying to change things to what a particular group of people say is right for the individual,’ he explains.”

demonstrative) couples” to feel vindicated in their own individuality. Even those “casual ticket-buyers who had paid their 15 bucks mostly to dance and hear songs they liked” could enjoy the Sylvester concert.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Sylvester told the black press, “I like to play for mixed audiences . . . not just any one audience. We’re racially mixed and we do everything, so we don’t play to any one group. We have blacks, whites, gays, straights, and that’s basically what we want,” even if he felt “gay audiences are the best to play for.”<sup>64</sup> One did not need to be homosexual, male, or black to appreciate Sylvester and his disco performances; s/he just needed to be open to the concept that everyone is entitled to his or her own chosen lifestyle.

However, the male homosexual community most strongly identified with and supported Sylvester as a disco star. No matter how much Sylvester denied the significance of his sexual orientation, it was clear, even in his own experience, that his homosexuality and outrageous displays of androgyny had an impact on how audience members responded to him. As much as Sylvester’s celebration of individual expression appealed to a wide and diverse audience, it was not a universal appeal. *Billboard* reported, “Sylvester’s energy and demeanor onstage have cut into his popularity in more conservative parts of the country. ‘They comprehend the music but the way we carry on. I don’t think they’re ready for us, especially in the Bible belt,’ he says.”<sup>65</sup> Sylvester also talked about people who came backstage after his shows just to stare at him. These people bothered him, but he felt their actions could be explained as them feeling uncomfortable around performers in general or the desire to get one more look at his

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<sup>63</sup> Christgau, “Sylvester Is a Star,” 73.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Collins, “Nobody Does It Like Sylvester,” 50. Also see Johnson, “Man Behind the Fantasy,” 56.

<sup>65</sup> Cary Darling, “Sylvester Still Loyal to Disco,” *Billboard*, 19 January 1980, 47.

costume.<sup>66</sup> In his attempt to assert the insignificance of his homosexuality to his musical endeavors, he failed to acknowledge the possibility that these people stared because they were shocked (perhaps appalled) by his androgynous, unconventional, and transgressive costumes. By July 1979, however, according to the British periodical *Black Music and Jazz Review*, “Sylvester had recently announced that he had decided to turn down all interview requests, ‘unless they’re special’” due to the “crass boorishness of a sizable majority of [critics]—particularly in the States.” Sylvester continued to insist that critics and audiences should be able to look past his androgyny and sexuality and focus on his music: “People have shown more interest in my personal sexual orientation and my costumes than in my music. *Sure* I’m gay *and* I’m outrageous about it! . . . But . . . I don’t sing gay songs. So what if I’m outrageous? What about the music?”<sup>67</sup> Even with the liberation movements of earlier years, not everyone could ignore and accept the unconventional ways of a male disco diva.

Those who did appreciate Sylvester’s ways eagerly read into them messages that the star himself attempted to avoid, and these messages held the most significance for his gay male fans. “Sylvester was an openly gay transvestite, and we were thrilled that the mainstream was accepting him. His success seemed like a symbol of a broader acceptance of gay people, and we thought he was forging the path for a future generation of openly gay stars,” remembers disco entrepreneur Mel Cheren in his memoirs.<sup>68</sup> Sylvester “in his own way makes a subtle statement on today’s gay politics,” according to *Sepia*. That statement, centered on individual liberation and expression, not only

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<sup>66</sup> Winters, “Disco Superstar Speaks Out!” 73.

<sup>67</sup> As quoted in Chris May, “‘I’m Gonna Concentrate on Jazz Now...’,” *Black Music and Jazz Review*, July 1979, 19.

<sup>68</sup> Mel Cheren, *Keep on Dancin’: My Life and the Paradise Garage* (New York: 24 Hours for Life Inc., 2000), 219.

criticized the discrimination against gays as a whole; it also actively sought to break down the divisions within the gay community itself. Gay American poet Aaron Shurin says, “He was somebody who annihilated the schism between the clones and the faeries, because they both adored him. Everybody felt like they owned him. Everybody felt like he was speaking to them.”<sup>69</sup> Taking on a persona that had significantly gone out of fashion in gay culture (in favor of the hypermasculinity of the Clone), Sylvester celebrated individuality within a community that sought liberation but had embraced conformity.<sup>70</sup> He celebrated difference and refusal to conform and through his music brought the gay community together in their shared commitment to liberation. As Joshua Gamson so eloquently explains in his biography of the disco diva:

Sylvester took the crowd to a middle where everyone was included: in one particular day or outfit or mood or song, he was a woman; in another, he was a man; often, especially on stage, the two were indistinguishable. What a buoyant creature to see walking your earth, in a neighborhood [San Francisco’s Castro District] so conflicted about maleness and femaleness! When he sang, . . . a lot of people said, they did not see his race. They heard his voice and they danced. What a happy holiday, in a neighborhood so uneasy in its race relations! Sylvester took them to a place where other people’s categories were irrelevant. . . . Sylvester was not a gay singer, or a black singer, he would say; he was just Sylvester.<sup>71</sup>

It was not only the gay community that was conflicted about gender, sexuality, or race in the 1970s, however, and Sylvester’s ability to bridge such gaps also contributed to his success in the mainstream.

Although not his biggest hit according to the numbers, “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” best epitomized what Sylvester was all about.<sup>72</sup> Considered in the

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<sup>69</sup> Aaron Shurin quoted in Gamson, *Fabulous Sylvester*, 132.

<sup>70</sup> Gamson, *Fabulous Sylvester*, 158.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.

<sup>72</sup> “Dance (Disco Heat)/You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” hit number one on *Billboard*’s Disco/Dance charts, but as individual singles, “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” only hit number thirty-six on the Hot



context of Sylvester's womanly falsetto, gender-bending costumes, and message of individual liberation, the song served as "a gay affirmation song that made Carl Bean look like he was still in the closet."<sup>73</sup> In the song, Sylvester sings about "dancin' on the floor" with his darling, how good it feels to have their bodies close together, how he needs more, so they go home to make love.<sup>74</sup> The refrain "I feel real" and "you make me feel mighty real" serves as the affirmation of this homosexual desire: these two men can feel real, genuine, accepted without having to engage in performance because their love is mutually reaffirming. In a society where gay men often remained in the closet and put on airs in their professional lives to avoid discrimination, to feel real meant expressing themselves honestly, taking pride in the role that had been denied them in larger society—something many gay men experienced firsthand in watching Sylvester perform in his outrageous costumes.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the seemingly simple concept of "feeling real," when sung by a man engaging in androgyny, probed the very meaning of what it meant to be a real (gay) man in American society. If Sylvester "feels real" in a man's suit or a woman's dress or a combination of the two, is he any less of a man? Is he any less gay because he chose not to conform to the clone stereotype of the era?<sup>76</sup> By declaring his realness, his authenticity, and his pride in who he was, Sylvester encouraged others to do

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100 compared to "Dance (Disco Heat)" reaching number nineteen. "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" arguably remains Sylvester's most enduring hit single, however, and received more direct references in the press consulted over the course of my research than any of his other singles.

<sup>73</sup> Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 328.

<sup>74</sup> "When we get home darlin' and it's/nice and dark and the music's in the air/Still you're hot and you kiss me back and it/Feels real good and I know you love me/Like you should." Lyrics by Sylvester and Tip Werrick, performed by Sylvester, "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)," on *Sylvester: The Original Hits*, compact disc (1978, Berkeley, CA: Fantasy Records, 1989), D26222.

<sup>75</sup> Gamson, *Fabulous Sylvester*, 146.

<sup>76</sup> Watching the "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" promo clip posted on youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ue2UXnxp8Rs>, brings these ideas visually to life as Sylvester blends male with female. Even his backup dancers are of an ambiguous gender with shoulder length hair and in costumes of shorts and tank tops or windbreakers.

the same while at the same time representing the confusion over what “should be” real in a society dealing with the aftermath of substantial social change.

Considered in the context of a musical genre that called into question the “authenticity” of black music and its construction of black masculinity, “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” also challenged ideas of what it meant to be a black entertainer and a gay black man. “With its synth licks, mechanized, galloping bass line, computerized hand claps, and uptempo drumbeats,” the song worked more in the Eurodisco tradition of mechanized soul, rather than the gritty soul/funk and real instruments many claimed as a defining feature of the African American musical tradition. At the same time, Sylvester’s vocals brought a true sense of emotion to the often disembodied nature of Eurodisco, the core of the gay disco repertoire. As Peter Shapiro put it, “The chicken shack of R&B and gospel’s storefront church got renovated by [Patrick] Cowley’s synthesizers, while at the same time Sylvester ruffled the detached exterior of synth-pop with an intense expression of rapture.”<sup>77</sup> Yet it was a song about “realness” performed by a black gay man, and thus presented a paradox of what “realness” meant for both musical genres as well as black gay men who had been forced to deny their real identities from an antagonistic society. To be black and gay was, for many in the mid-twentieth century, a double discrimination—not manly enough for the patriarchal philosophy of Black Power, discriminated against at the door of many a white gay discotheque.<sup>78</sup> Sylvester with his

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<sup>77</sup> Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 78; Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 328. Both authors trace the origins of Hi-NRG to “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real).” Cowley played synthesizer in Sylvester’s band.

<sup>78</sup> Gamson, *Fabulous Sylvester*, 130. On racial discrimination in gay community see: Larry V. Matthews, Letters, “Blacks Spurned?” *The Advocate*, 7 May 1975; John Victor Soares, “Special Report: Black and Gay,” *The Advocate*, 17 November 1976. At discos see: Roger Chaffin, “Chicago Disco,” *Chicago Gay Life*, 20 August 1976; “Hub Disco Faces Black Bias Rap,” *Variety*, 6 October 1976; “Justice Quiets Disco,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 14 July 1979; Stephen Kulieke, “Picketers Protest Alleges Discrimination at Bistro,” *Chicago Gay Life*, 12 September 1980; Memorandum, Black and White Men Together, N.Y. to Lesbian and Gay Organizations of New York City, Re: Racial Discrimination in New York’s Lesbian and

commercial success made these black gay men visible and offered them legitimacy in their chosen lifestyle. It was a stand much appreciated by his black gay fans. A reader once wrote in “to highly commend [*Sepia*] on [its] article on the beautiful and famous ‘Gay Queen Sylvester.’ He/she is beautiful. For years I have waited for some good black book to break the ice that has frozen ‘us’ black gays from reality and most of all society.”<sup>79</sup> Sylvester’s commercial success and public exposure through disco, not to mention his challenge to conventional standards of “real,” offered a sense of fluidity to African American musical tradition and understandings of black masculinity.

Lesbians as well as heterosexual men and women could also identify with the refrain of feeling real, moving the appeal of the song beyond the gay male disco world through lyrics that fail to specify gender, race, or sexual orientation. If disco was the faceless producers’ medium its critics made it out to be, “feeling real” could mean whatever its listeners needed it to mean, and those who only knew the song, and not the artist’s image or outrageous costumes, could interpret it as simply a song about sex. As gay journalist Randy Shilts once commented, “Unless you’re already clued in, you’d have no way of knowing Sylvester isn’t a woman.”<sup>80</sup> “Mighty Real” could have found its place among the many other disco songs sung by divas as an expression of female desire. In a time when movements like women’s liberation and gay liberation had called into question what “real” gender roles should be, the concept of “feeling real” could serve as affirmation for whatever role an individual had chosen to adopt. Sylvester, through his music, was capable of reaching people who were otherwise suspicious, even in a concert

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Gay Community, 24 December 1981, International Gay Information Collection, New York Public Library, Ephemera – Bars (A-F), Circles.

<sup>79</sup> Gustt Bibb, letters to the editor, *Sepia*, February 1975, 6.

<sup>80</sup> Shilts, *Pop Music*, “Strictly Between the Lines,” 26.

setting. As Vince Aletti recounted, when Sylvester opened for Chaka Khan in 1978, the predominantly straight crowd received him “with a mixture of caution, confusion, and amazement.” Yet, by halfway through his set, Sylvester’s remarks—“‘Sometimes folks make us feel strange’ . . . ‘But we’re not strange,’ he continued . . . ‘and those folks—they’ll just have to *catch up!*’”—were greeted “with an immediate roar of approval and support. Sylvester was no longer mystifying, he was mighty, mighty real, and the audience had *caught up*.”<sup>81</sup>

That Sylvester made his biggest impression in disco is significant because it was not his chosen musical genre but the one that embraced him to the point of commercial success. Sylvester did not disparage disco; in fact, he quite liked the music and culture, but he was careful to make it clear that he was not simply a disco artist.<sup>82</sup> With roots in gospel and the blues, he incorporated disparate musical influences into his concerts and albums. Yet, disco was the only commercial genre liberated enough to take on Sylvester’s unique and outrageous expression. “Sylvester has been called the ‘embodiment of disco,’ which is true enough, but one never gets the impression that disco is his bandwagon attempt at notoriety,” explained Connie Johnson in the *Los Angeles Times*, continuing, “What he brings to the genre is heart and the strength of his convictions.”<sup>83</sup> His costumes changed over time, but there was no studied attempt to over-produce Sylvester into something “appropriate” for mainstream consumption. As he explained in *Sepia*: “The show I do now, which is considered ‘tamely outrageous,’ is the same thing I was doing when no one would touch me. When I was considered the

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<sup>81</sup> Aletti, “Sylvester Isn’t Strange,” 93.

<sup>82</sup> Darling, “Sylvester Still Loyal,” 47; Collins, “Nobody Does It Like Sylvester,” 50; Winters, “Disco Superstar Speaks Out!” 74; Salvo, “Gay Queen of Rock,” 61; and Andre Perry, “Sylvester: Expanding His Horizons,” *Soul*, April 1980, 9.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson, “Sylvester: Music for Happy Feet.”

black drag queen—the outrageous—the black press wouldn't get behind me and all that. I was doing costume, then, but it's the exact same thing that I'm doing now and it's a hit."<sup>84</sup> Disco, with its roots in homosexual subcultures, was a natural space for Sylvester to find his niche, and by the time he hit it big, the larger sector of the American music-buying public had also been clued in to the celebration of freedom and individuality that disco propounded and Sylvester put on display. It was one way in which disco, in performing the tensions of a post-movement society, provided the possibility of more open and accepting concepts of gender and sexuality to the mainstream.

Sylvester's penchant for sequins and glitter—the androgynous drag of a gay “queen”—had become problematic among much of gay male culture in the 1970s, but as far as Sylvester was concerned he was no more in drag than any of the clones among whom he lived in San Francisco. “To me, everyone is in drag. If I see some guy with \$600 worth of leather on, he might as well have \$600 worth of sequins on, I mean it's drag,” he told *The Advocate* in 1979.<sup>85</sup> As part of the variety of gay life in the 1970s, many gay men put on “calculated costume to enhance or fantasize self-image” and as a way to communicate sexuality, lifestyle, and politics.<sup>86</sup> Gay men donned a variety of such looks, all with different, often personal, meanings and all understood to be drag in some form, drag being defined as clothing worn as a way to fulfill a role one wishes to play—either what is expected of them by society or rebellion against that role.<sup>87</sup> Before

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<sup>84</sup> As quoted in Collins, “Nobody Does It Like Sylvester,” 49. Also see Salvo, “Gay Queen of Rock,” 63, which talks about how program directors and radio people would not play Sylvester's glitter rock because he was openly gay.

<sup>85</sup> Schauer, “Sylvester: Sterling Talent,” 32. Also see Gamson, *Fabulous Sylvester*, 158.

<sup>86</sup> For a breakdown and discussion of these “calculated costumes,” see “Image & Fantasy,” *The Advocate*, 27 August 1975.

<sup>87</sup> For a contemporaneous analysis of drag on a meta level as well as its meaning in the general understanding of experimentation with clothing of the opposite gender see Mark Thompson, “The Politics of Drag,” *The Advocate*, 15 June 1977.

gay liberation, the feminized male in female drag or foppish dress and mannerism dominated gay male closet culture. Having absorbed the societal stereotypes (and medical explanations) of gay men as womanly and effeminate, participants in pre-liberation gay culture considered more butch constructions of homosexual masculinity to be deviant and relegated them to marginalized sectors of the gay community.<sup>88</sup> With the onset of gay liberation, these constructions and costumes changed.

Activists rejected the idea that gay men were failed men with womanly natures and claimed that to believe so was a symptom of internalized homophobia. The most radical gay liberationists sought to upend society's constructions of gender roles completely and took on the costumes of genderfuck, blending elements of masculine and feminine (often beards with dresses) in an attempt at radical social change that liberated all people from prescribed expectations. Most gay men considered genderfuck too radical, however, and it quickly faded to an occasional costume donned specifically for shock value. What came to dominate instead was the reformist image of a butch gay man who kicked off the effeminate stigma by wholeheartedly embracing the look and behavior of "traditional" masculinity. As Martin P. Levine points out in his study of this masculine gay male, "Although there were surely other social types—such as gay liberationists [genderfuck], 'twinkies,' 'drag queens,' and 'leathermen'—prior to the AIDS epidemic, clones constituted the community's most defining social type."<sup>89</sup> The association of gay men with anything effeminate had become problematic within a gay liberation atmosphere and was overtaken by a different kind of drag—the macho clone.

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<sup>88</sup> Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, edited with an introduction by Michael S. Kimmel (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 56-57.

<sup>89</sup> Levine, *Gay Macho*, 7. For more on genderfuck and the adaptation of gay male costume post-liberation see "Image & Fantasy," 25 and Levine, *Gay Macho*, especially 5, 28 and 57.

What was once referred to as “butch” had, by the late 1970s become so recognizable, stylized, and ubiquitous that gay men began referring to the look with the term “clone.”<sup>90</sup> The gay clone was most often a white urban male of relative affluence, early twenties to early forties, whose drag was in a style closely associated with the most traditional and iconic of masculine roles—the jeans and flannels of the common working man. It was a costume meant to signify masculinity and that tended to highlight masculine sexuality. Resident of San Francisco in the 1970s, Edmund White, provides a colorful description, as told to Sylvester biographer, Joshua Gamson:

a ‘strongly marked mouth and swimming soulful eyes (the effect of the mustache); a V-shaped torso by metonymy from the open V of the half-unbuttoned shirt above the sweaty chest; rounded buttocks squeezed into jeans, swelling from the cinched-in waist, further emphasized by the charged erotic insignia of colored handkerchiefs and keys; a crotch instantly accessible through the buttons (bottom one already undone) and enlarged by being pressed, along with the scrotum, to one side; legs molded in perfect, powerful detail; the feet simplified, brutalized, and magnified by the boots.’ The emerging Castro Clone was about gender, and it was about fucking, but it was pretty much the opposite of gender-fucking. It was, White noted, ‘an image of homosexual desire potent enough to have crowded out all others.’ It was a vision of sameness, of short-haired white men and no beads at all, of a gay culture that was not so strange.<sup>91</sup>

Clothing oneself in leather was a closely related costume that tended to signify a penchant for S&M sex, and which *The Advocate* dubbed to be “seeking after a masculinity to transcend even Macho.”<sup>92</sup> Ultimately, the costume of the gay clone drew on archetypes of masculinity in the attempt to construct the gay man as fully male.

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<sup>90</sup> Randy Alfred, “Will the Real Clone Please Stand Out?” *The Advocate*, 18 March 1982, 22, says, “A clone is an organism that’s an identical biological copy of another. Since about 1978, when the usage first precipitated out of the oral tradition and onto the printed page . . . , it’s been widely applied to similarities of costume among urban gay males.” He goes on to argue that the similarities went beyond dress to an actual “clone consciousness,” focused around partying, sex, and a lack of creativity.

<sup>91</sup> Gamson, *Fabulous Sylvester*, 130. For other descriptions of the clone look see Levine, *Gay Macho*, 11, 59; Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 68; and “Image & Fantasy,” 24.

<sup>92</sup> “Image & Fantasy,” 26.

While the costume seemed to suggest a sufficiently masculine image, clone behavior and lifestyle also exaggerated traditional notions of masculine sexuality. As Martin Levine argues, “It [was] a specific construction of masculinity that used sexual activity as a major vehicle for gender confirmation.”<sup>93</sup> Gay adolescents, like straight boys, learned from larger society that masculine sexuality was “detached, privatized, objectified, and phallogentric,” more about performance and conquest than emotion and intimacy.<sup>94</sup> In the midst of a sexual revolution that many felt valorized quantity over quality, gay clones took these cues and sought to validate their masculinity by creating a gay subculture of active and aggressive sexuality that at the most extreme engaged in frequent, anonymous sexual encounters referred to as “tricks.” Moreover, the clone costume turned the gay male into an eroticized sexual object, in line with “Gay Manifesto” author, Carl Whitman’s charge that “sexual objectification is a focus of our quest for freedom.”<sup>95</sup> The gay male clone openly and actively celebrated sex in a way that conformed to the most macho of masculine stereotypes, making sexuality central to the reinforcement of his masculinity in a society that often continued to stereotype gay men as effeminate.<sup>96</sup>

The gay clone was one who sought—through costume and behavior—to redefine the gay man as legitimately masculine, but the clone rarely lived such a simplified relationship with gender construction. In their attempt to prove themselves “real men,” most clones were putting on a kind of disingenuous masculinity that belied other aspects of their personality kept hidden from view—those aspects considered more feminine.

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<sup>93</sup> Levine, *Gay Macho*, 2.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 177.

<sup>96</sup> For more on clone sexuality see Levine, *Gay Macho*, esp. chp 4.



Macho had become ubiquitous in gay male culture because it had been commodified (i.e. could be bought through a gym membership and the right clothes to wear in that gym) and emphasized playing a part through the appropriate use of clothes, accessories, actions, and attitude.<sup>97</sup> Levine's study of clone culture in Greenwich Village points to how such a lifestyle was at once a parody and emulation of masculine stereotypes that never fully negated the fact that "clones were equally adept at both genres of gender display." He explained: "Both masculinity *and* femininity were a form of drag, a put-on, which could just as easily be taken off. And yet, as one man commented to me, 'Darling,' he said, 'beneath all this butch drag, we are still girls.'"<sup>98</sup> It was for this reason that Sylvester could have such a positive impact in the gay world despite his by-then-unconventional style. Gay men who adhered to clone culture did so as if on a constant pursuit of masculine perfection—the perfect look, the perfect body—that held the distinct possibility of fostering isolation and competition rather than community and support.<sup>99</sup> Sylvester's confidence in his sexuality and persona, his understanding that all gender performance was drag of some form or another, and his ultimate focus on being "real" in whatever sense an individual defined it allowed him to speak to a community in the middle of redefining itself as well as a dominant mainstream working through its own changes.

### **The Village People and Masculine Archetypes**

Martine Levine's study of clone culture also revealed that clones had specific musical tastes that distinguished them from other gay styles. He explained: "As is the

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<sup>97</sup> Alan Ebert, "Making Too Too Mucho about Macho," *The Advocate*, 3 May 1979.

<sup>98</sup> Levine, *Gay Macho*, 59 and 63.

<sup>99</sup> Brent Harris, "Answers from the Dancer: An Interview with Andrew Holleran," *The Advocate*, 8 May 1979.

case with heterosexuals, homosexuals varied in musical preferences, with some liking show tunes, jazz, or rock . . . But clones favored disco, and it was ubiquitous in their world.”<sup>100</sup> Because of this proclivity for disco, it was only fitting that the ‘butch,’ often hypermasculine, persona that many gay men took on in the 1970s was a performance brought to its extreme in the form of the Village People. Based on masculine American archetypes that French producer Jacques Morali saw walking the streets and in the discos of New York City’s Greenwich Village—Native American, cowboy, leatherman, construction worker, military man, and cop<sup>101</sup>—the Village People were a disco group that embodied the blurred line between hetero- and homosexual masculinity in the 1970s. Rather than blur that line through effeminate images and actions, as did most other representations of disco masculinity, the Village People did so by tapping into the very notions of masculinity that had dominated American mythology for generations. The Village People became disco superstars with two gold- and three platinum-selling albums between 1977 and 1980 by presenting themselves as promoters of individual freedom and capitalizing on the ambiguous nature of their masculine sexuality.<sup>102</sup> That they could be read as everything from a gay pride group, to a cartoonish caricature of the gay male world, from the epitome of macho, to a tongue-in-cheek ridicule of America’s macho mythology—that they were a multiracial group that challenged concepts of what it meant to be a “man” in America—is what made them so popular and what makes them iconic of mainstream disco.

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<sup>100</sup> Levine, *Gay Macho*, 70.

<sup>101</sup> The latter two roles were flexible depending on the song and scenario in which they performed. For example, the soldier became a sailor for “In the Navy” and the cop a Naval Officer.

<sup>102</sup> Certification information taken from Gold and Platinum searchable database on Record Industry Association of America (RIAA) website, <http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinum.php>.

The story goes that Frenchman Jacques Morali entered a gay nightclub in New York's Greenwich Village and saw Felipe Rose, of Native American and Puerto Rican descent, dancing on the bar in Native American regalia; nearby was a man dressed like a cowboy and another all in leather. Morali was thus inspired to turn these "Village people" into a musical group—to combine this macho drag with the musical soundtrack of gay liberation to make a disco album that appealed specifically to the gay male community. "I wanted to do something only for the gay market," Morali told *Rolling Stone* in 1978.<sup>103</sup> He proceeded to put together a studio group and an album that celebrated gay geographical locations like "San Francisco" and "Fire Island." Lyrics such as "Searching for what we all treasure: pleasure" and "Don't go in the bushes, someone might grab ya" made only moderately discreet reference to the activities of the subculture that populated these areas.<sup>104</sup> On the cover was a group of anonymous men of multiple races dressed in the standard "butch" street garb of gay male culture—tight plaids or t-shirts to show off muscular arms and chests, tight jeans to display a nice "bulge," and a leather cap and vest on the man in back. Felipe Rose in his Native American headdress is the only figure in this image that would become a part of the eventual stage act. He and African American lead vocalist Victor Willis (the police officer) were the only two members involved in the debut album, but that album was so

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<sup>103</sup> Ken Emerson, "The Village People: America's Male Ideal?" *Rolling Stone*, 5 October 1978, 27. For other depictions of the Village People origin story and Morali's original gay-market motivation see, for example, Steven Gaines, "Jacques Morali: Man of the 'People,'" *New York*, 25 September 1978, 109; Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 224; Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 255-256; and Victor Bockris, "Young Morali Conquers America," *Interview*, March 1979, 66. The specific gay club where Morali first came up with the idea is uncertain: some recounting mention 12 West as the setting; many reference the Anvil, but most don't specify at all.

<sup>104</sup> Lyrics taken respectively from Jacques Morali, et al., performed by Village People, "San Francisco (You've Got Me)" and "Fire Island," on *Village People*, cassette, (Los Angeles: Casablanca Record and Filmworks, 1977), NBL5-7064. In its review of "San Francisco," *Billboard* claimed that the song's "subject deals with San Francisco's cult lifestyle." Top Single Picks, Disco, Village People, "San Francisco," *Billboard*, 1 October 1977, 94.

popular that Morali auditioned professional singers and dancers to make up the Village People roster that would perform on future albums and tours—Rose and Willis plus David Hodo (construction worker), Randy Jones (cowboy), Glenn Hughes (leatherman), and Alexander Briley (military man).<sup>105</sup> Their outfits became decidedly more like costumes with the creation of a stage act, but the inspiration of the gay male clone with its celebration of the masculine body clearly remained.

In March of 1978, the Village People released their second album (first as a cohesive group), *Macho Man*, which continued its appeal to the gay market. The album featured them “look[ing] badass funky on the cover,” as described by Charles Herschberg in *The Advocate*. “They look the way ADVOCATE ads read: *mucho macho, white, black, American Indian, leather, Western, hard-hat, hot hunks,*” he said. “Inside,” continued Herschberg, “they sing about broad shoulders and hairy chests, breaking into ‘I Am What I Am.’”<sup>106</sup> The inclusion of gay male reference points and macho imagery continued with songs like “Key West” and “Sodom and Gomorrah,” and lyrics like “You can best believe that he’s a macho man/Ready to get down with anyone he can” were further references to an ambivalent sexuality.<sup>107</sup> Continuing a long tradition of puns and inversions in American performance and building on gay entertainment’s tradition of camp—a sensibility characterized by its love of the extravagant and exaggerated (especially in terms of sexual characteristics)—the Village People spoke to multiple

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<sup>105</sup> This line up would change by 1980, with Willis replaced by Ray Simpson before film, *Can’t Stop the Music*. Jeff Olson replaced Randy Jones on their 1981 album *Renaissance*. By this time, however, the disco backlash combined with the group’s search for a new identity had cut significantly into the Village People’s popularity.

<sup>106</sup> Charles Herschberg, “Prophets or Profits? The Village People,” *The Advocate*, 19 April 1978, 31.

<sup>107</sup> Lyrics by Jacques Morali, et al., performed by Village People, “Macho Man,” *Macho Man*, compact disc (Los Angeles: Polygram Records, 1978), 314 532 170-2.

audiences at once and challenged boundaries and definitions of “proper” social roles.<sup>108</sup>

*Macho Man* became the Village People’s first platinum-selling album, representing a definitive break into the mainstream, but its use of double entendre and inclusion of gay male cultural reference points meant that the gay community also celebrated *Macho Man*, just as it had its predecessor album.

Critics and (gay male) fans easily read the Village People as a gay pride group, a collection of gay males capitalizing on the disco market to promote the cause of gay liberation. Their first album, especially, was interpreted as such. Not only did *Billboard* describe it as “better than average disco” and “funky and intensely driving mainstream disco” that was “highly danceable”; the reviewers read it as “reflect[ing] a rather urgent quality in its pulsating rhythms, liberation themes and Victor Willis vocals.”<sup>109</sup> After their first album, the gay press celebrated the Village People to be “the first big disco group to be openly gay,” based solely on the lyrics of their music and despite the fact that the group itself had not come together yet and the lead singer, Victor Willis, was heterosexual and married.<sup>110</sup> For a community who wanted a group that finally spoke to their specific needs, that reality did not matter. As Herschberg explained in his analysis of the Village People for *The Advocate*, “Their sexual preferences were not and have not been labeled. They express their call for liberation simply by being and projecting

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<sup>108</sup> For examples of double entendre in American performance history, see Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) and M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). For further discussion of camp see Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (1964, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 105-119 and Vito Russo, “Camp,” *The Advocate*, 19 May 1976.

<sup>109</sup> Top Single Picks, Disco, Village People, “San Francisco,” *Billboard*, 1 October 1977, 94 and Top Album Picks, First Time Around, *Village People*, *Billboard*, 13 August 1977, 62.

<sup>110</sup> John Schauer, The Ticket, Records, *The Advocate*, 28 December 1977, 30. On Willis’s sexual orientation and marital status see Herschberg, “Prophets or Profits?”; Phil Bondi, “Village People Storm Chicago,” *Gay Life*, 23 June 1978; Emerson, “America’s Male Ideal?”; Connie Johnson, “Village People: More Than Just a Disco Group,” *Black Stars*, May 1979; and Lynn Van Matre, “Village People’s Music: No Message, No ‘Sleaze,’” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 June 1979.

themselves.” And for those who chose to interpret it as such, they projected themselves through “lyrics bouncing off the walls in celebration of a recognized gay lifestyle.”<sup>111</sup>

Their second album, *Macho Man*, held more fodder by which the gay community could claim the Village People as a disco group singing their song of liberation. As *Billboard* predicted in their review of the album, “I Am What I Am” was “widely interpreted as a gay pride anthem”: noted *New York Times* fashion writer Guy Trebay read the general theme of the song to be “coming out” even though there is no specific mention of homosexuality in the lyrics. He also interpreted “Macho Man” and “Key West” to be about “getting laid and driving south for warmth and sex,” respectively, despite the fact that neither song specifically mentions the act of sex.<sup>112</sup> That such actions could be read into the lyrics about hot, macho bodies meeting people and having fun during leisure nights in Key West made the Village People a group that legitimated the right of gay men to have sex in a society that historically denied them that right. “They are the Village People of . . . everywhere people experience freedom of lifestyle and social and sexual liberation,” cheered Charles Herschberg.<sup>113</sup> Perhaps a self-described “disco doll” quoted in *The Advocate* best sums up the positive response the gay community gave to Morali’s cultural production:

When I first heard the song “Fire Island” in the Ice Palace, I thought that somebody in the disco must have added special lyrics to the music. The music was very hot, very professional, and the words were about *us*, about *our* scene. I couldn’t believe it . . . . I know that disco has gay roots, but it was especially nice to watch this particular group, Village People, make number one and stay there. I felt proud of them, and I felt proud of myself. They were like any other disco group, except that they were more butch, and they were singing for *me*.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Herschberg, “Prophets or Profits?” 31.

<sup>112</sup> Top Album Picks, Disco, Village People, *Macho Man*, *Billboard*, 25 March 1978, 150; Guy Trebay, “How Macho Is That Doggie in the Disco?” *Village Voice*, 27 March 1978, 47.

<sup>113</sup> Herschberg, “Prophets or Profits?” 31.

<sup>114</sup> “Disco doll” quoted in *Ibid.*, 31.

Morali had succeeded in his goal of making a disco group of and for a gay male community.

What was surprising was how well the Village People succeeded in crossing over from a homosexual market to a heterosexual mainstream. With the success of *Macho Man* and subsequent releases, the Village People had become “arguably the hottest disco group in the world.”<sup>115</sup> By the middle of 1978, they had made appearances on television shows like *American Bandstand*, played concerts at Disney World, sold more than two million records, and won awards such as Disco Group of the Year at the Billboard International Disco Forum. Moreover, they were consistently playing to both gay and straight audiences.<sup>116</sup> By maintaining a persona that fit with mainstream expectations but which spoke to a gay audience through its allusions to homosexual culture, the Village People entertained and satisfied a general audience at the same time that they held a subcultural conversation of pride and possible resistance, similar to how black performers at the turn of century grounded their work in a double consciousness that manipulated their stereotyped stage masks in the name of political transgression.<sup>117</sup> As the “disco doll” acknowledged, the references to gay male culture might not be apparent to those not involved: “I realized that straight people might not pick up references to gay places in

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<sup>115</sup> Gaines, “Jacques Morali: Man of the ‘People,’” 108.

<sup>116</sup> Bob Weiner, “Macho Men Meet Mickey mouse, Donald Duck, Computers, and Weiner at Disney World,” *Soho Weekly News*, 14 September 1978, clipping found in New York Public Library, International Gay Information Collection, Ephemera—Subjects, Music Misc.-New York City Misc., Folder: Music Groups—The Village People. The following articles reference the types of audiences for whom the Village People played: Gaines, “Jacques Morali: Man of the ‘People,’”; Trebay, “How Macho Is That Doggie”; Herschberg, “Prophets or Profits?”; Emerson, “America’s Male Ideal?”; Dennis Hunt, “The Ambisexual Village People,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 August 1978.

<sup>117</sup> The practice of using cultural references of which only certain subcultures would be aware is not unique to the Village People or the 1970s. See, for example, Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006) and Peter Bailey, chapter 6, “Music Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture,” in *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 128-150.

funky 'Fire Island' because the gay thing was there, but it wasn't overly obvious."<sup>118</sup> For those heterosexuals who were not aware, the Village People merely tapped into classic American masculine mythology. They served as "a disco-paeon to the joys of Fascinating Manhood" and performed "personas modeled on masculine archetypes."<sup>119</sup> The *Black Stars* article from which these quotes came made no reference to their personas being about homosexual manhood; they were just masculine archetypes recognizable throughout American history. In that, they caused what some journalists labeled "machomania" and opened a space in the disco world for a more traditional sense of macho to be celebrated alongside the softer masculinity that other male disco stars represented.<sup>120</sup>

In a society and culture in which other masculine models were, by comparison, androgynous and effeminate, the Village People were able to speak to those heterosexual men who felt their masculinity threatened by such changes, encouraging them that America's tradition of rugged masculinity did not need to fade. Jacques Morali believed that straight audiences liked the Village People (especially their single "Macho Man") because "the Village People don't look like queens, they look like boys. And straight guys in America want to get the macho look."<sup>121</sup> And in some ways men did respond in this manner, celebrating the macho look in events such as a national "Macho Man" contest sponsored by Casablanca Records and the California Club discotheque in Miami in 1978, during which males across the United States competed to prove themselves the

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<sup>118</sup> Herschberg, "Prophets or Profits?" 31.

<sup>119</sup> Johnson, "More Than Just a Disco Group," 27 and 28.

<sup>120</sup> See Emerson, "America's Male Ideal?" 26 and Brant Mewborn, "Village People Wreak Machomania," *After Dark*, September 1978.

<sup>121</sup> Morali quoted in Emerson, "America's Male Ideal?" 30. Also see Abe Peck, "The Face of Disco: Macho Men with their Tongues in their Cheeks," *Rolling Stone*, 19 April 1979, 13.



“Number One macho man in America” by parading in “macho man” costumes and answering questions about the macho lifestyle and disco generally.<sup>122</sup> In other instances, it was less about getting the look than relishing the notion of what the Village People represented—that the macho man of American mythology could still be celebrated even if only within the fantasy and escape of the discotheque. For example, in September 1978, *After Dark* reported, “On a recent Saturday night, the predominantly Italian teenage crowd [at 2001 Odyssey] feverishly cheered the group on with chants of ‘Macho! Macho! Macho!’”<sup>123</sup> The men in the crowd at the discotheque of *Saturday Night Fever* fame would not have given up their snazzy shirts and trousers—part of what delineated status in the working-class club—for any of the costumes of the Village People characters. But they could still cheer the group on because they represented masculine attitudes that had dominated American history and which seemed threatened in the wake of liberation movements like feminism and gay rights—and could do so without knowing (or acknowledging) that the Village People had anything to do with those liberation movements themselves.

Part of the Village People’s macho appeal was that they represented sexual liberation for straight women and men as much as they did for gay men. In a society where sexual freedom and commercialization had heightened the expectations of the actual experience of sex, the Village People made it possible to find both humor in these expectations and excitement in the public enjoyment of sexuality. As rock critic Stephen Holden explained:

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<sup>122</sup> “‘Macho Man’ Contest At Miami Club,” *Billboard*, 9 September 1978 and Sara Lane, “Florida Finds a ‘Macho Man,’” *Billboard*, 7 October 1978.

<sup>123</sup> Mewborn, “Village People Wreak Machomania,” 31.

For [the Main Street audience], the Village People represent sexual liberation. First Elvis made it okay for a man to hump a guitar. Then John Travolta made it cool for a guy to dance gracefully. And now the Village People have made it possible to laugh at the masculine mystique, thereby defusing some of the anxiety about sexual performance that goes with the '70s sex-as-sport ethic. And though the Village People may be funny, they're also a turn-on. I suspect that despite the group's obvious phoniness, their mass audience, dutiful consumers all, at least half-believe that some extra-hot stuff burns behind all that drag.<sup>124</sup>

As emblems of macho masculinity—a key component of which was sexual virility—the Village People represented “iconic sexual perfection” and presented it in ways that fans could interpret as titillating or humorous.<sup>125</sup> In stage shows during which the members “tantalize[d] audiences by strutting and bumping and grinding to the music” and Hughes, the leatherman, routinely unzipped his leather jacket to reveal his hairy chest covered in chains, there certainly was a celebration of sexual freedom in a package commercialized for mainstream consumption—one in which heterosexual men could celebrate the idea that macho had not died or take the pressure off themselves by finding humor in the entire mystique.<sup>126</sup> It was also a celebration in which straight women—especially those who bemoaned the loss of the macho man—could lust after muscular men with hairy chests, short hair, and mustaches—often in a setting that, with few exceptions, made no sexual reference to women and allowed them to create their own fantasies.<sup>127</sup>

The Village People put forth a framework reflective of the “Me-Decade” values that had grown out of developments such as identity politics and liberation movements,

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<sup>124</sup> Stephen Holden, “The Village People Liberate Main Street,” *Village Voice*, 23 April 1979, 61.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Hunt, “Ambisexual Village People”; Emerson, “America’s Male Ideal?” 30.

<sup>127</sup> Considering Morali originally created the Village People as a group meant to appeal to gay men, nearly all their music dealt with masculine subjects or seemingly gender-neutral subjects like geography. There are two exceptions in which women make an appearance in lyrics—Jacques Morali, Henri Belolo, and Victor Willis, “Manhattan Woman” on *Go West*, cassette (Casablanca Record and Filmworks, 1979), NBL5-7144 and [author unknown], “The Women” on *Cruisin’* (Casablanca Records, 1978), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUb2XxJCP54>. These songs were not hit singles for the group; they were also part of albums later in the Village People’s career when they made explicit attempts to claim universality and that they provided something for everyone.

especially sexual liberation. “The act both celebrates and satirizes the narcissism not only of the gay world but of the entire ‘Me Decade,’” said music writer Ken Emerson in *Rolling Stone*. Emerson went on to quote construction worker, David Hodo, who said, “We didn’t go for a gay concept when we put the show together. We went for a totally male, masculine celebration—that men can get up there and feel their tits and do bumps-and-grinds and still remain men. Narcissism is a good thing. Everyone does it.”<sup>128</sup> In this statement, Hodo is reinforcing the narcissistic concept of macho that had been the ideal mode of masculinity for most of American history and reinforcing it in a sexual sense with insider knowledge of the gay male culture of the 1970s combined with lamentation for straight male culture. Knowing that gay male culture involved public celebration of the body, shirtless men bumping and grinding in discotheques across the country, his denial of “a gay concept when we put the show together” reassured straight men that celebrating their bodies and their sexuality in a public setting—in this case on the dance floor—did not make them gay. Male rockers may have sung about sex, but not in a way that encouraged dancing and public celebrations of the body. If rockers stood as the macho symbols of the music world, but didn’t dance, the Village People wanted to encourage men that they could dance—enjoy disco music—and still be macho men.

The Village People celebrated macho in a society that had spent the last decade coming to terms with feminist critiques of that very mythology, and did so by skillfully evading the real complications of what they were doing. According to group members, the Village People did not intend to challenge women’s liberation: “‘We’re having fun with the concept of machoism,’ Hodo explained, . . . ‘We’re not advocating it. In the song we use it as a positive word, not to be made fun of but to have fun with. We’ve

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<sup>128</sup> As quoted in Emerson, “America’s Male Ideal?” 30.

been commenting on machoism with a sense of humor. We're taking a concept that has been negative, thanks to women's lib, and we're having fun with it."<sup>129</sup> Randy Jones, the cowboy, echoed these sentiments: "We're redefining machismo in a positive sense. Previously it meant that a man who was macho had to put other people down to build up his own self-image. For us, macho is essentially an inner-strength that everyone can draw on in facing the world assertively and independently."<sup>130</sup> Such statements left the meaning open to interpretation—celebration, parody, put-down, straight, gay or any number of combinations—and helped make the Village People's representation of masculinity seem malleable and immanently performative, necessary traits in a time when feminists and other groups were challenging and redefining ideas of masculine, macho, and gender ideals generally. Unlike many men—and most male disco stars—of the 1970s, who tried to make accommodations to feminism by embracing their feminine, emotional side or specifically trying to address the demands and desires of liberated women, the Village People chose not to address the complexity of "macho" by framing it in terms of "inner-strength," "independence," and "fun."

In evading this complexity, it was also helpful that many perceived them to be presenting their image in a tongue-in-cheek, comical manner not meant to be taken seriously. To many critics, the humor was undeniable. Ken Emerson described the hit single "Macho Man" as the year's funniest and mocked their concert as "a loud blur of hilarity, too patently absurd to be erotic."<sup>131</sup> Moreover, he blatantly rejected Morali's claim that the group was a sincere statement on his personal sexual orientation and "not parody at all." As far as Emerson was concerned, the Village People were funny

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<sup>129</sup> Hunt, "Ambisextrous Village People."

<sup>130</sup> Jones quoted in Mewborn, "Village People Wreak Machomania," 31.

<sup>131</sup> Emerson, "America's Male Ideal?" 30.

“precisely because Morali doesn’t realize it, doesn’t see the humorous naiveté of his foreigner’s infatuation with caricatures of Americana.”<sup>132</sup> Emerson backed up his claim by quoting Hodo talking about how the group members themselves had a sense of humor about the whole act because if they had not they would have been laughed off the stage.<sup>133</sup> Stephen Holden, on the other hand, while calling *Macho Man*’s tongue-in-cheek obvious, admitted that the Village People reflected and encouraged the commercialized eroticism of the 1970s, which, combined with their “shrewdly opaque stance,” meant people could read into them whatever they wanted. “Much of straight middle America,” he noted, “takes them at face value—as a showbiz cop, cowboy, etc.—while a rapidly shrinking gay minority perceive them as militant spokesmen.”<sup>134</sup> Even though the humor seemed obvious, many critics also acknowledged that the group’s intentions were uncertain and that people would interpret them in different ways. “Take it seriously or accept it as caricature,” said Charles Herschberg in *The Advocate*, and Abe Peck talked in *Rolling Stone* about how “The lyrics [of ‘Macho Man’] were broad-based enough for both gay and straight males to accept as either gospel or goof.”<sup>135</sup> Whether obviously comical or taken at face value, the Village People used their ambiguity to their advantage and, in doing so, allowed gay references and sensibilities to seep into non-gay society.

Perceiving the Village People as comical caricature appealed to both gays and straights. It allowed gays to laugh at the straight world unknowingly participating in gay culture or to revel in heterosexual acceptance even if it was superficial. As *Chicago*

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<sup>132</sup> Emerson, “America’s Male Ideal?” 30.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid; Abe Peck quotes Hodo as saying, “We’re sticking our tongue in society’s cheek” in reference to the song “YMCA.” Peck, “Face of Disco,” 14.

<sup>134</sup> Holden, “Village People Liberate Main Street,” 61.

<sup>135</sup> Herschberg, “Prophets or Profits?” 31; Peck, “Face of Disco,” 13.

*Tribune* staff writer Lynn Van Matre said about “Macho Man,” with its “ridiculously simple lyrics open to both straight and sly interpretations,” the group was “appealing to both those who are sure the band is having a gay joke on straight society, and others . . . who are captivated by the costumes and seemingly cartoonlike superficiality of the whole thing.”<sup>136</sup> For heterosexuals, accepting the Village People as comedy meant they did not need to take the gay pride message seriously, which allowed audiences to accept homosexuality but only in caricatured form. “Many people can’t tell whether this is a straight group poking fun at gays or a coy gay unit discreetly poking its head out of the closet and muting its homosexuality with light comedy,” reported Dennis Hunt, music writer for the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>137</sup> Watching the Village People could be a disguised form of mocking homosexual men in correlation with one possible interpretation, or it could be an acceptance of homosexuality in muted, less threatening form. In his 1980 master’s thesis, “Get Up and Boogie: An Ethnographic Study of Disco Behavior,” Jason Robert Beck argued that the Village People were “one group that helped to give Americans comic relief and helped to bridge the gap between the gay and straight world,” claiming that “middle class fans were not bothered by the gay implications of such songs as ‘Macho Man’ and ‘YMCA.’”<sup>138</sup> Cartoonish stereotypes of homosexual clones meant

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<sup>136</sup> Van Matre, “Village People’s Music.”

<sup>137</sup> Dennis Hunt, “Having ‘Gay Old Time at the Disco,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 April 1979.

<sup>138</sup> Jason Robert Beck, “Get Up and Boogie: An Ethnographic Study of Disco Behavior,” (Masters Thesis, Anthropology, California State University, Sacramento, 1980), 35. Beck references Barbara Graustark’s article (with Janet Huck, Peggy Clausen, and Ronald Henkoff), “Disco Takes Over,” in *Newsweek*, 2 April 1979, which says, “The most humorous of disco acts, the Village People are masters at having it both ways: most of their fans are middle class and straight and couldn’t care less about the gay implications of such songs as ‘Macho Man,’ ‘I’m a Cruiser’ and ‘Y.M.C.A.’”(64).

merely to entertain were less offending than the serious reality of homosexuality in American society.<sup>139</sup>

Moreover, not knowing for certain whether the Village People and their act were gay or straight meant people could deny the gay pride aspect, deny their homosexuality completely and accept them merely as icons of Americana meant to entertain, even as the homosexual references slyly penetrated the social psyche. The case was similar for the gay clones the Village People imitated. While it was always more role-playing than genuine and threatened to undermine a strong gay community, the clone image played a significant part in furthering the gay liberation agenda because of how it confused standard stereotypes of masculinity and homosexuality. Not only did an effeminate stereotype continue to define homosexuality in straight minds; the adoption of butch costumes by gay men and more androgynous looks by straight men made the concepts of “homosexuality” and “masculinity” hard to pin down. As Dr. C. A. Tripp explained when asked if it was always possible to spot a homosexual: “Absolutely not. . . . since only a fraction of homosexuals are effeminate, and, besides, heterosexuals often show such signs. Furthermore, a great many people involved in homosexuality are the opposite of what the layman would expect, meaning that they are macho males of the truck driver-cowboy-lumberjack variety.”<sup>140</sup> The butch image for gay men paradoxically served to

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<sup>139</sup> John Rockwell, *The Pop Life*, *New York Times*, 20 April 1979, specifically described the Village People as portraying a “cartoon-homosexual stereotype” and *Rolling Stone* opened a lengthy article on the group with a drawing entitled “The cartoon that conquered the world,” 19 April 1979, 13.

<sup>140</sup> Philip Nobile, “The Meaning of Gay: An Interview with Dr. C. A. Tripp,” *New York*, 25 June 1979, 37. To complicate constructions of masculinity further, the clone drag and masculine posturing was nearly indistinguishable from that of the Bowery Punk scene that was flourishing underground in New York City, fed mostly by straight, middle-class white males. For further contemporary analysis of the two butch/macho scenes, see Frank Rose, “The Butch Fantasy: America Goes Punk,” *Village Voice*, 9 August 1976. Moreover, while Levine would argue that the clone look was stylized in a way that distinguished it from the garb of straight men, such a claim becomes harder to defend when considered within a national context. By the end of the 1970s, the butch image of the clone had caught on in the middle of the country

make homosexuality invisible to a large portion of straight society that still expected gay men to be effeminate at the same time that it called into question the very definitions of “masculinity” and “homosexuality” as it made “traditional” masculinity accessible to gay men while many straight men were breaking away from that stereotype.

The sexual double-entendre of Village People songs contributed to this confusion. It gave them what Dennis Hunt described as “a conventional literal meaning and a gay connotation for the hip crowd to revel in.”<sup>141</sup> This double meaning meant that people could easily miss or ignore the latter interpretation, but its presence in such a successful mainstream entertainment medium was highly significant: “in this basically antigay culture it’s still a little shocking when half of that double meaning is rooted in homosexuality.”<sup>142</sup> Even though music critic John Rockwell joked, “those in the know (any 5-year-old with a brain) can pick up on their homosexual subtexts,” he, like most other journalists, reported on how, in the case of the Village People’s success, “the idea is to turn out songs full of heavy-handed double meanings, so that they can ostensibly be read ‘straight.’”<sup>143</sup> The double entendre of their songs and the “are-they- or-aren’t-they (gay) ambiance” made the Village People fascinating as a mainstream phenomenon, but some people were in on the joke and others were not.<sup>144</sup> “‘I don’t think,’ said Morali, ‘that the straight audiences know that they are a gay group,’ and controversies over their

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and in smaller towns, where it tended to be much less stylized than in big cities like New York. Compare Levine, *Gay Macho*, 62 and Arthur Bell, “Gay American Gothic: Normal in the Heartland?” *Village Voice*, 21 May 1979, 38.

<sup>141</sup> Hunt, “Having ‘Gay Old Time.’”

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> John Rockwell, *The Pop Life*, *New York Times*, 20 April 1979.

<sup>144</sup> Lynn Van Matre, “Village People—Pasteboard Entertainment,” *Chicago Tribune*, 22 June 1979.



hit single “Y.M.C.A.” made it clear that at least some people did indeed remain ignorant as to the true orientation of the Village People.<sup>145</sup>

According to *Billboard*, the director of a YMCA in Tulsa, Oklahoma, wrote a letter to local radio stations asking them to “‘give some thought’ before playing the Village People hit ‘YMCA,’” describing the song as “kind of crude” and as offering an inaccurate description of the YMCAs in Tulsa. Only one station program director complied, citing local obligation to the YMCA as his reason, not anything offensive in the song lyrics. Tulsa program directors generally agreed that the song was not tasteless or crude: “I can’t see the lyric content being offensive—it sounds like a commercial for the YMCA,” said Steve Owens of KTFX-FM.<sup>146</sup> In Manhattan, the possibility of legal action on the part of the National Council of YMCAs was concerned with trademark infringement, “not against the Village People or any kind of gay mystique,” as reported in *Rolling Stone*. Joe A. Pisarro, executive director of the National Council of YMCAs’ Office of Communications claimed the gay issue was not a factor saying, “I don’t get the feeling it is widely known that, if in fact this is a gay group, that it is.”<sup>147</sup> Those listeners familiar with the gay overtones of the Village People’s costumes or the supposed history of YMCAs as cheap places for casual sex on the part of gay men heard the song as a celebration of that lifestyle and, thus, offensive according to conservative cultural politics. Yet, considering there is nothing explicitly sexual in the song’s lyrics, most people uninitiated into gay male culture could hear the song the same way co-songwriter

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<sup>145</sup> Emerson, “America’s Male Ideal?” 30.

<sup>146</sup> Ellis Widner, “Village People’s ‘YMCA’ Stirs Controversy Breeze in Oklahoma,” *Billboard*, 25 November 1978.

<sup>147</sup> Peck, “The Face of Disco,” 14.

Victor Willis claimed it was intended to be heard: ““‘Y.M.C.A.’ is a humanitarian song,’ Willis says. ‘It just deals with helping somebody.’”<sup>148</sup>

Similar confusion existed over the single “In the Navy,” which some listeners insisted was recruitment for America’s young men to go gay but others heard simply as a recruitment song for the Navy. The United States Navy cancelled a visit of the Village People to a naval ship after learning that the song, a cult favorite among the homosexual crowd, might be merely a gay joke on the Navy and straight society.<sup>149</sup> Such songs may have been “primo example[s] of cultural manipulation . . . in which listeners have heard everything from ‘apple pie’ to ‘drop the soap,’” but the strategy worked for the Village People.<sup>150</sup> It brought them success among all parts of American society, while slyly allowing a gay liberation message to find its way into mainstream American culture.

Another reason the Village People were able to make it big in a heterosexual market was their claim to a universal message that did not rely on a homosexual image or politics. Like Sylvester, the Village People attempted to avoid the label of political spokesmen and tried to claim that their sexual orientation was insignificant relative to their music. “We’re not making any heavy disco statement about sexuality. We’re not saying we’re gay and we’re proud. We’re selling the music not *ourselves*,” David Hodo told Dennis Hunt of the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>151</sup> In some cases, Hodo would completely

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Concerning the two interpretations of “In the Navy” see “Navy Sinks Village People Promo Movie,” *Chicago Gay Life*, 20 April 1979; Holden, “Village People Liberate Main Street”; and Van Matre, “Village People’s Music.” “Navy Turns Colors on Village People Song,” *Jet*, 26 April 1979, reports the cancelled naval ship visit. Allegedly, Anita Bryant sent the United States Navy a telegram explaining the homosexual recruitment/joke interpretation of the song and another to the President asking that Morali be deported because of his corrupting influence on American youth. See Van Matre, “Village People’s Music” and William Franklin, “Sounding Off on the Sound Stage,” *The Advocate*, 27 December 1979.

<sup>150</sup> Peck, “The Face of Disco,” 14

<sup>151</sup> As quoted in Hunt, “Ambisexual Village People.” Also see Herschberg, “Prophets or Profits?” 31, in which Victor Willis says, “Music is music . . . If it’s good, it’s good. There might be a whole lot of people

shun the message-bearing tag saying, “Politics isn’t our thing . . . We’re not out to lay heavy political messages on our audiences. We’re not preaching or advocating anything but fun-fun-fun.”<sup>152</sup> More often, however, members admitted to a message, but one that they could claim was so universal as to be not political. “People have tried to turn Village People into spokesmen for various causes, ‘but we’re not politicians,’ Briley says. ‘We really resist that. We can’t speak for anyone, and we’re more into *people* liberation than anything else.’”<sup>153</sup> No matter how much the gay community wanted to claim them as gay liberation spokesmen, the press most often presented the message as universal rights, rather than exclusively gay rights. Mainstream periodicals like *Rolling Stone* called “I Am What I Am” a “human rights anthem,” and publications oriented to a homosexual readership often also accepted that the message went beyond gay liberation. “The message,” according to Charles Herschberg, of *The Advocate*, was, “that the struggle for liberation is no longer limited to black people, women or gay people and that now is the time for all people to come out of the darkness and take a stand for human rights.”<sup>154</sup> *Gay Life*, the gay community newspaper of Chicago, lauded the fact that the audience of a recent concert was not strictly a gay crowd, saying, “It was a pleasant blend of gay and straight with acceptance on both parts. This is what The Village People, a mixture of gay and straight musicians themselves, is about. They are not promoting gay freedom, but ‘people freedom,’ a far-reaching ideal portrayed in the song ‘I Am What I

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singing on albums who are gay. It’s nobody’s business. I’m not hung-up about sexuality. Our message is love.”

<sup>152</sup> Hodo quoted in Hunt, “Ambisexual Village People.” Also see Van Matre, “Village People’s Music.”

<sup>153</sup> Johnson, “More Than Just a Disco Group,” 29. Randy Jones also used the term “people liberation” in Paul Grein, “Village People Get Serious with New ‘Macho Man’ LP,” *Billboard*, 13 May 1978, 54.

<sup>154</sup> Mitchell Schneider, Review of Village People, *Macho Man*, *Rolling Stone*, 7 September 1978, 118; Herschberg, “Prophets or Profits?” 31.

Am.’”<sup>155</sup> By expanding their message beyond gay pride, the Village People could penetrate mainstream sensibility in a way that still held meaning for their core constituency.

A universal message of personal liberation, however, often involved evasion of any connection to homosexuality or politics in favor of mere commercialism—a strategy that would, over time, cause tension with the Village People’s homosexual fan base. Unlike Sylvester, who was open about his sexual orientation even if he claimed its insignificance, the Village People were evasive about their true sexual orientations, in how they represented themselves on stage as well as in the press. In keeping with their strategy of double-entendre in which audience members could legitimately read anything they wanted, the group members and their producer actively constructed a sexuality that denied homosexual categorization. “‘Anytime I write something that’s too one way or the other, Jacques will say, “Oh no, darling,”” Willis says.”<sup>156</sup> Their lyrics had to be universal enough to attract a broad audience. “We don’t leave anybody out when we’re on stage. We flirt with men and we flirt with women,” David Hodo told Dennis Hunt, claiming, “People are getting off on the music and don’t give a damn about our sexual preferences.”<sup>157</sup> On stage, the members of the Village People actively avoided behavior that would place them in one sexual category or another. In an attempt to avoid categorization, Hodo constructed an audience that passively accepted their musical act without giving much thought to the meaning behind it, ignoring the fact that gay men were actively invested in their identity as homosexual and that the response of their straight audience was most likely less about indifference than creating meaning out of

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<sup>155</sup> Bondi, “Village People Storm Chicago,” 26.

<sup>156</sup> Peck, “The Face of Disco,” 14.

<sup>157</sup> Hodo quoted in Hunt, “Ambisexual Village People.”

this musical group that spoke to their own sensibilities. “It’s all fantasy. That’s what we’re all about. . . . And if people want to think I’m gay to complete their fantasy, fine. If they want to think I’m straight, that’s fine, too,” Hodo told the *Chicago Tribune*, continuing his attempt to construct the Village People as non-categorical. When the journalist pointedly asked, “Which is he?” Hodo skillfully evaded the question.<sup>158</sup>

The Village People claimed their evasion of sexual categorization was about presenting a universal message of “people liberation” and individual freedom, but they also explained it in terms of gaining a wider audience. Both reasons came out in a 1978 *Billboard* article:

Says Willis, 26 . . . “Because we broke out of gay discos in New York, everyone thinks we are the property of the gay subculture.” But he adds that it’s important to the group to cross into the wider pop market.

In keeping with its aim of mass acceptance, the group is stressing the universality of its lyrics. Says Willis, “We’re saying to everybody: be who you are.” . . . .

Members of the group are thus evasive about their own sexuality. Explains David ‘Scar’ Hodo, 27: “We have something to say, so we don’t want to limit our audience.”<sup>159</sup>

Comments that spoke of a fear of limiting their audience made the Village People sound overly commercial. Their focus on commerciality—and ultimate success as a commercial group—combined with a refusal to define their sexual identity, gay or straight, made them accessible to a wider, straight audience, but caused the gay community turn away from them. In contrast, Sylvester also spoke in terms of universality, but he rarely framed his discussions in terms of sales and never denied his sexual orientation, even if he claimed its insignificance, and the gay community stood by him well into the 1980s. It was a subtle shift in rhetoric, but as the Village People

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<sup>158</sup> Van Matre, “Village People’s Music.”

<sup>159</sup> Grein, “Village People Get Serious,” 54.

increasingly separated themselves from even a cursory connection to gay clone culture, many gay men who were once fans rescinded their support of the group, and the Village People progressively became the exclusive property of a straight mainstream.

The Village People insinuated universality and a commitment to individual freedom from early on in their career, but these claims and their aversion to homosexuality intensified the more commercial the group became. In April 1978, one of the Village People explained their two standing ovations on *American Bandstand* by saying, “The audience was familiar enough with the gay scene to know the score . . . They accepted us as is.”<sup>160</sup> Yet, by May of 1979, Victor Willis insisted that while the intent behind the Village People was a very serious commitment “to engulf people with energy and show them the forces of life,” he made it very clear that the group was “not about gay rights, or about glorifying gay life-styles.” He even pointed out that he played no role in writing the first album (he was at least co-lyricist for their following albums) and claimed that addressing that album to gays was just a gimmick.<sup>161</sup> And as early as September of 1978, their producer believed, “the gays hate them . . . . The gays think it is the insult, a parody . . . . *Alors*, the straights love them.”<sup>162</sup> It was a belief that defined how Morali chose to produce them over time, focusing on their mass audience potential rather than aiming them at the gay disco audience as he originally envisioned. “Now that this is one of the nation’s most popular groups the gay overtones and the lascivious antics have been mostly removed,” was how Dennis Hunt reviewed their June 1979 show in Los Angeles. In comparison to the local concert performance of a year before, he

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<sup>160</sup> Unspecified Village Person quoted in Herschberg, “Prophets or Profits?” 31.

<sup>161</sup> Johnson, “More Than Just a Disco Group,” 31. Speaking to a black-oriented magazine probably intensified Willis’s insistence that the Village People was not about gay rights. It was also one of a handful of articles in which his heterosexuality and marital status were highlighted.

<sup>162</sup> Gaines, “Jacques Morali: Man of the ‘People,’” 109.

claimed, “In toning down the show to make it suitable for the masses, the Village People has come up with a much more impressive act.”<sup>163</sup> Yet, Stephen Holden noted the lack of sexual double entendre in the early 1979 Village People album, *Go West*, and reviewed it as a “‘70s disco equivalent of a Busby Berkeley homage to the Common Man.”<sup>164</sup> The toning down of the Village People’s gay overtones and sexuality with their increased popularity was obvious even if the aesthetic value of this change was debatable.

This retooled commercial and mass audience orientation became most apparent with the Village People’s endeavor in film, *Can’t Stop the Music*, which was so commercially safe that it failed to garner appeal with either a straight or gay audience. Instead of double entendre and multiple possible meanings, any references to gay imagery were to be deleted in *Can’t Stop the Music*.<sup>165</sup> As a film loosely based on the story of the creation of the Village People, it completely evaded the gay origins of those beginnings. “We couldn’t have gotten away with overt reference to gay lifestyles and still earned a PG rating,” said Morali when questioned about the lack of gay imagery. Knowing that “movie money is conservative money,” Randy Jones was not concerned about people accusing the group of being commercial and losing fans: “We’re growing, developing a wide range of audience appeal. And I’m not worried about losing gay fans. We’re growing. If you don’t evolve you run the risk of stagnation.”<sup>166</sup> That a PG rating and “evolution” was more important than a commitment to the gay community, speaks volumes about the concessions the Village People and their producer had made in their

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<sup>163</sup> Dennis Hunt, “Village People: Disco Fever for the Folks,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 June 1979.

<sup>164</sup> Holden, “Village People Liberate Main Street,” 61.

<sup>165</sup> In the final version of the film, there was a montage that took place in a YMCA with the song playing in the background, clearly referencing the double-entendre of the original single. See *Can’t Stop the Music*, DVD, directed by Nancy Walker (1980, Troy, MI: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2002). In the end, however, the movie tanked at the boxoffice, making it relatively insignificant as a representation of the Village People as a group.

<sup>166</sup> Franklin, “Sounding Off on the Sound Stage,” 33.

attempt at mass-audience appeal. And it was with the knowledge that *Can't Stop the Music* would “apparently be exorcised of any controversial imagery” that a gay community emphatically voiced its mounting dissatisfaction with the group.<sup>167</sup> In the December 1979, issue of *The Advocate*, the entertainment section clearly articulated the concern of many gay men over the transformation of the Village People:

1977. They seemed like such a godsend then. . . . Collectively, six gay role models. Six versions of our macho drag right up there, upfront in the mainstream hit media. . . . They were us. Self-parody, sure. But they were us. And they were ours.

Later, we still knew what they subculturally sang about in the showers of the YMCA.

Then, slowly, subtly, imperceptibly—in the revolutions of each new LP, in the evasions of each new press release—something happened. . . . commercialized and consumed by Middle Class—and straight—America . . . . They weren't ours anymore.<sup>168</sup>

The Village People would always have gay male fans, but the commitment dwindled with the increased commercialism and decreased gay overtones.

Moreover, *Can't Stop the Music* failed at the box office, and The Village People had only one single break the *Billboard* pop top fifty after “In the Navy.” The Village People had appealed to the mainstream by using a rhetoric of universality that succeeded in making them more commercial while increasingly alienating their original gay audience. But by the end of 1979, they had become such an over-produced theatrical group that they lost their multivalent identity and no longer spoke to a broad audience that could define them in different ways to fit varied interests. Their earlier hits continued to resonate with and entertain mainstream audiences into the next decades, but they were unable to reproduce the same level of success with future albums.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>168</sup> BH, The Ticket, *The Advocate*, 27 December 1979, 31.



The less than extravagant downfall of the Village People's career, however, should not negate the meaning they held at the height of their popularity and continue to hold in a larger mainstream that still consumes their early hits. The Village People were significant because, no matter how covertly, they challenged the conventions of a historically heterosexual society. Radcliff Joe recognized this significance in his contemporary analysis of the disco industry, saying, "Morali brings the concept of social confrontation through music full cycle, with his defiant challenge of our socially acceptable norms of sexual behavior." By commodifying gay male stereotypes of the 1970s and making them a success in larger American society, Morali worked against the otherwise heterosexually dominated music industry, and provided a group many gay men identified with as their own. Joe continued, "Village People represent the fantasy image after which many gay males aspire and offer and [sic] acceptably, nonthreatening profile to which most heterosexuals can relate."<sup>169</sup> According to Joe, the Village People made homosexuality acceptable and non-threatening precisely because they presented it as macho, not effeminate, and thus fitting in with historical myths of American masculinity. Heterosexual men also consumed the Village People as comic relief against the pressure of sexual freedom, as a reaction against the soft masculinity of other disco performers, and as a desire to return to macho as dominant ideal.

## **Conclusion**

As disco moved into the mainstream from the gay underground and straights began to partake in the party, the gay liberation element remained significant but subdued and replaced with a message more in tune with general freedom of expression. By presenting themselves in a manner that different groups could read in ways most useful to

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<sup>169</sup> Radcliffe A. Joe, *This Business of Disco* (New York: Billboard Books, 1980), 29.

them—and by constructing a message of universality and individual freedom, rather than political spokesmen for any one cause—Sylvester and the Village People put forth a message that fit with the splintered and individual values of the 1970s as “Me Decade.” Randy Deats explained it fittingly in his 1979 overview of disco culture, *Dancing Disco*: “By straights [The Village People] can be read as harmless messages of harmony; by gays, it’s all browlifting, tongue-in-cheek wit.” Either way, he continues, “There is more message in the Village People’s madness than in most other disco groups.”<sup>170</sup> The message of freedom and tolerance, of sexual revolution and individuality, of pleasure for all, which had made up the gay origins of disco had found its way into disco’s most commercialized and mainstream forms. The commerciality of mass-market disco sometimes threatened this message altogether, but the politics of pleasure that gay liberation expressed through disco dancing continued to inform mainstream disco and provided stars with which a gay audience identified and found solidarity. And by presenting their message in a language of universality and individuality—by separating themselves from the politics in which they were actually engaged—these disco stars were able to garner a wide audience. Such malleability and variety of readings was what made disco so attractive in the mainstream. Yet, in calling into question the very definition of concepts such as “masculinity” and “homosexuality”—in interrogating what constitutes “real”—these elements of disco as liberation also held the seeds from which the disco backlash would develop.

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<sup>170</sup> Deats, *Dancing Disco*, 80.

## Conclusion

In the summer of 2001, Harry Wayne Casey, leader of KC and the Sunshine Band, attended a Salute to Disco Night at a Florida Marlins home game in which Mike Veeck, son of 1970s owner of the Chicago White Sox and co-coordinator with Steve Dahl of 1979's "Disco Demolition Night," apologized for the infamous disco backlash incident and claimed he wanted "to make it right." Giving what Casey felt was "closure to the whole thing," the event seemed to serve as a symbolic end to the unofficial ban on 1970s disco and an open door to celebrate its pleasures without shame or derision.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the turn of the millennium has experienced something of a resurgence and re-appropriation of 1970s disco music and icons that had for so long been ridiculed and largely absent from mainstream mass media except as the butt of many jokes about the decade in which "it seemed like nothing happened."<sup>2</sup> Typical disco sounds and iconic disco anthems have been featured on commercials and in shopping malls; disco has become a regular category of competition on *American Idol*; and disco stars including Barry and Robin Gibb, KC and the Sunshine Band, and Donna Summer have performed on the highly rated television show. For most people, this resurgence represents the "rebirth" of a genre deemed dead by the media, and the consumption of disco is a form of nostalgia or inconsequential fun—disco is merely party music that harkens back to a supposedly simpler time before the polarization of culture war and onset of AIDS, a time

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<sup>1</sup> Craig MacInnis, *That's the Way I Like It: The Harry Wayne Casey Story* (Ontario, Canada: Team Power Publishing, 2002), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982).

when partying and sexual pleasures came without fear of disease or organized condemnation. And many still remember 1970s disco only through its most iconic images, rather than the complex and multivalent form it actually was.<sup>3</sup>

For others, however, 1970s disco remains a significant tool in challenging the gender and sexual expectations that maintain inequality, and a few snippets from disco's legacy reveal that certain pieces of today's popular culture have returned to disco as a meaningful beginning to important social change that lasted well beyond disco's media-contrived "death." In the 2008 film version of the ABBA-inspired Broadway hit *Mamma Mia!*, for example, the middle-aged women who revive their all-female disco group, Donna and the Dynamos, declare themselves "the world's first girl power band!"<sup>4</sup> Such a declaration underscores the significant role disco played in making female empowerment a central element of American popular music in the decades since. Indeed, hip-hop soul diva Beyoncé Knowles, whose oeuvre includes songs of powerful and independent women as well as sexually provocative and assertive women, is quite literally indebted to disco queen Donna Summer whose hit, "Love to Love You Baby," she sampled in her own single, "Naughty Girl," which reached number three on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in 2004. That such images of women in control of their lives and sexuality are mostly accepted as a given in today's mainstream entertainment is, in part, the result of Donna Summer and the divas of disco who first broke ground and pushed boundaries in their mainstream engagement with and depictions of women and female sexuality. Disco helped transform pop music to make such images commonplace, but it

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<sup>3</sup> KC himself maintained a stereotyped understanding of disco music : "I don't think it ever was disco music, at least not the way most people think of it," KC says of his group's genre-defining 'Miami Sound.'" See MacInnis, *That's the Way I Like It*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Mamma Mia! The Movie*, DVD, directed by Phyllida Lloyd (Universal City, CA: Universal Studio Home Entertainment, 2008).

also opened mainstream popular music to issues that are highly volatile and disagreed upon. Disco spoke to and for an uncertain and confused gender landscape in a society dealing with the changes endemic to sexual revolution and various liberation movements, and while society has experienced certain degrees of progress, the debates surrounding such uncertainty remain. In the decades after disco, no single genre dominated the charts and encapsulated all the confusions and uncertainty of gender as disco had in the 1970s. But a brief look at the music landscape of the 1980s (into the 1990s), illustrates how these debates remained unresolved and continued to shape the music charts as the elements of disco permeated across mainstream popular music and society.

As this dissertation has shown, the mainstream disco craze offered complicated and assorted possibilities for gender and sexual expression, which while welcome and exciting to fans and participants, were also challenged from various directions in ways that were just as contradictory as disco itself. The rock contingent's "disco sucks" campaign was only the most vocal and demonstrative of disco's detractors, and it in itself was riddled with contradictions. Rockers resented disco for pressuring them to be sexual but criticized it for not having "balls"<sup>5</sup>; they disliked disco for being black and gay but hated it for being "plastic" and "straight," claiming that it was so commercialized, it appealed to everyone and lacked any sense of rebellion. Beyond the white rockers who denied disco esteem because of its failure to fit a canon constructed over time to include blacks only on the margins, many blacks rejected disco as a whitening of black music and a threat to black patriarchy. Many gay disco denizens denied the power of sexual self-definition within a disco mainstream they attacked as overly commercial, conducive to

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<sup>5</sup> What Frank Rose described as "a quality they interpret to mean aggressive power chords and masturbatory guitar solos." See Frank Rose, "Discophobia: Rock & Roll Fights Back," *Village Voice*, 12 November 1979, 37.

conformity, and lacking the same sense of freedom they found in their own clubs, but other groups attacked disco expressly because its sense of sexual freedom contradicted their desire for a private and pure sexual environment. Dovetailing with the growth of conservative sentiment in American society, the attacks on disco in the final years of the 1970s were often moral condemnations of its sexualized culture. Others, less concerned with its moral implications, took issue with disco's representation of women as sexual objects produced by men to meet male expectations or as insatiable sex fiends who merely reinforced racialized stereotypes. Male critics also tended to tear down these sexually assertive disco women as no more than sexual playthings because of how they otherwise threatened a male sense of sexual privilege and dominance.<sup>6</sup>

Without overstating the influence of these anti-disco sentiments, one must acknowledge the effect they had on reorganizing the music industry in light of how the term "disco" became tainted. The backlash did not kill disco, but there are reasons why we understand the 1970s, not the 1980s, as the "disco era." The most recognizable and commercialized aspects of 1970s disco were mocked, parodied, and deemed dead in the mass media, with the 1980 hit movie *Airplane!* offering just one example. As the craze faded and disco became "dance music," the genre no longer dominated the charts to the

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<sup>6</sup> Much has been written on the disco backlash. For a well-presented, detailed articulation of its homophobic elements and threat to heterosexual masculine sensibilities see Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 16, No. 2 (May 2007), 276-306. Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), esp. 231-248, also discusses the backlash in relation to masculinity and homosexuality. Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), chp. 10, esp. 377-382, positions disco's downfall within a complex matrix of economic troubles, homophobia, threats to masculinity, rise of the New Right, and its conflicted racial signifiers. For more on its racial aspect see Echols, "'Shaky Ground': Popular Music in the Disco Years," in *Shaky Ground: The '60s and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) and Carolyn Krasnow, "The Development of Aesthetic Ideology in Popular Music: Rock and Disco in the Nineteen Seventies," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999). Krasnow's dissertation also deals with critiques of disco based on class and gender. Also see Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), especially chapter 6, in which she explores the sentiments against disco from a variety of viewpoints.

extent “disco” had in the previous years, precipitating certain segregating and remasculinizing influences on the popular music scene. It seemed that as American society became more polarized the music charts went with it, but even as the disco craze faded and evolved, few parts of mainstream popular music escaped its influence. Even as the larger media mocked its formulas and commercial excess, the disco aesthetic continued to color much popular music, and the new and complicated issues of gender representation and “proper” sexual expression it did so much to make standard in mainstream culture continued to be debated within the popular music scene.

Indeed, in the aftermath of disco backlash, white rock regained a solid foothold on the pop charts, with the 1980s being the decade Bruce Springsteen’s “popularity finally caught up with his critical acclaim.”<sup>7</sup> Whether one interpreted his career as critique or celebration, the indelible rocker reached such heights of success by projecting the image of an idealized, “traditional” masculinity through his “authentic” performances of rock auteurship.<sup>8</sup> With disco no longer dominating the charts, heavy metal also gained ground and became what musicologist Robert Wasler describes as “arguably the most important and influential musical genre of the 1980s,” with lyrics that were largely objectifying or hateful to women and a central concern of constructing masculine power and control. Moreover, country music found a stronger place on the mainstream pop charts, and a brief surge in country western dance clubs in the early 1980s was another indication that the malleable and progressive gender roles fostered in the glitzy disco environment were perhaps losing ground. As John Travolta went from *Saturday Night Fever* disco king to

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Hilburn, “Springsteen Heads a Good But Sad Year,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 December 1980.

<sup>8</sup> On Springsteen’s image and its relation to masculinity, see Klaus D. Heissenberger, “An All-American Body? Bruce Springsteen’s Working-Class Masculinity in the 1980s,” in *The EmBodyment of American Culture*, ed. by Heinz Tschachler, Maureen Devine, and Michael Draxlbauer (Münster, Austria: LIT Verlag, 2003), 101-110 and Gareth Palmer, “Bruce Springsteen and Masculinity,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. by Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 100-117.

*Urban Cowboy* Stetson stud, many followed, fulfilling a fantasy where “men can play the role of the macho cowboy” and “women can play the role of the ‘sweet young thang.’”<sup>9</sup>

Yet, all this apparent regression could never completely wipe out the advances and changes that disco had helped to foster in gender definition and sexual relations in addition to musical production and sound. The changes disco brought to mainstream music influenced even the white, male bastion of rock. Since a genre like disco had helped make the concept of assertive female sexuality and power a more acceptable expression in mainstream music, women such as Pat Benatar and the Wilson sisters of Heart infiltrated the historically male-dominated terrain of cock rock and heavy metal—taking on its aggressive postures and masculine-identified aesthetics and garnering Top 40 hits.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, much of the most popular and enduring rock hits of the 1980s and early 1990s were power ballads—lyrics of feminine-identified romance and emotion sung over masculine-identified guitar power chords and intense volume by men in bare chests and tight pants that emphasized their sexual virility. Wasler explains this shift in hard rock as an attempt to appeal to a female audience, but considering the changes that had occurred in gender standards and definitions in the previous era, I would also explain it as about reaching a male audience that was not interested in the otherwise excessively macho posturing of metal and had, instead, become accustomed to a more complex version of masculinity heard previously in the mainstream with disco.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Earl C. Gottschalk Jr., “New Nightclubs Are Different: The Bull Throws the People,” *Wall Street Journal*, 9 October 1980. Reports on country and western dance clubs can be found in most major newspapers, approx. 1980-1982.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Wasler, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), x.

<sup>11</sup> Wasler, *Running with the Devil*, 120-123. As Wasler discusses, the androgynous long hair (and makeup for some) of these metal bands continued a tradition in rock and roll reaching back to the 1960s—rebellion from stuffy standards of middle-class masculinity (124-133).



Additionally, one of disco's most enduring influences was to make dance-based popular music and dancing to recorded music staples of American culture, so much so that even an "authentic" rocker like Springsteen introduced up-tempo synthesizers and syncopation to his 1984 classic "Dancing in the Dark." The permanence of dance music (renamed from the disco charts) as a recognized chart category in *Billboard* that did not exist before the 1970s suggests the enduring significance of dancing as an entertainment form, one that tends to be centered on expressions of sexuality and individuality. Above all, public and communal dancing never ended for many who had embraced the lifestyle. Fewer people were dancing in the 1980s, but it remained a popular activity. Especially among gay dancers, disco not only lived, it gained strength in the 1980s, as devoted followers of dance music maintained networks of clubs and continued to practice a politics of pleasure largely disconnected from the mainstream. As Walter Hughes has argued, the onset of AIDS and its devastating effects among gay dancers gave disco new meaning that made it more a music of mourning and survival than a celebration of pleasure, but its work in creating an army of lovers subsuming themselves to the beat in order to upset and redefine identities lived on into the next decades.<sup>12</sup> And the music to which they danced, while itself fragmenting into different genres under the umbrella term "dance music"—warehouse, techno, trance, garage, Hi-NRG—took from and built on the techniques and aesthetics of disco, including the driving 4/4 beat, the mechanical and synthesized sounds of Euro-disco, and mixing and slip-cuing to extend the groove.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Hughes, "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 147-157. Also see Mel Cheren, *Keep on Dancin': My Life and the Paradise Garage* (New York: 24 Hours for Life Inc., 2000).

<sup>13</sup> For more on these underground dance cultures see Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day* and Kai Fikentscher, *"You Better Work!": Underground Dance Music in New York City* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000). Sarah Thornton's study, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995), is also helpful, but is based largely in Britain.

While many gay men and participants in underground dance culture were finding release through the evolving disco sounds of harder dance tracks like house, garage, and Hi-NRG, those in the mainstream who continued dancing into the 1980s, did so largely to the fusion sounds of danceable rock and New Wave, which blurred the lines of traditional rock and disco both in musical aesthetics and gender representation. New Wave, a more mainstream-friendly outgrowth of punk rock, rebelled against the formula and predictability its followers perceived in disco and commercialized 1970s rock by fusing punk with pop. Discarding the claims to authenticity that mired rock music of the day, New Wave bands created music with more of a pop sensibility that experimented with a variety of musical styles and brought strong electronic elements to their punchy, unusual sounds. Early New Wave music was rock with a beat meant for dancing, even if it was a very different kind of dancing than that done at the standard discotheque (i.e. the pogo, which had dancers jumping up and down to the beat). And while many New Wave bands considered excursions into commercial disco culture by bands such as Blondie “selling-out” and abandoning the punk ethos, by the 1980s, numerous New Wave songs were played in discos and incorporated smoother rhythms and a 4/4 beat, either in an ironic and parodic sense or as genuine dance sentiment.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond its sound, New Wave also included those gender conventions that had made disco a key cultural text of a more liberated era. Punk and New Wave were scenes based on a do-it-yourself philosophy that emphasized self-expression and individuality, which provided a space for strong female personalities that spoke of and to female

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the overlaps of punk, New Wave, and disco see Charles Kronengold, “Exchange Theories in Disco, New Wave, and Album-Oriented Rock,” *Criticism* 50, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 43–82; Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 394–395; and Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 252–258. On Blondie “selling-out” see, for example, Richard Comelin, Pop Music, “Blondie’s Disco Detour: Big Seller or Big Sellout?” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 June 1979 and John Rockwell, The Pop Life, *New York Times*, 12 October 1979;

aggression, power, and sexuality: Patti Smith, Siouxsie Sioux, Debbie Harry as the lead singer of Blondie, and the eventual Riot Grrrl movement that developed as an expressly feminist sentiment when punk became increasingly male dominated.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the Eurythmics lead singer, Annie Lennox, took on a variety of characters in her musical image, ranging from male impersonation and androgyny to exaggerated femininity, which served as a way for her to express a wide range of emotions. Like Grace Jones, who had previously bent gender divides in disco and was also finding success with the New Wave format, Lennox defended her androgyny and gender transformations in the press by explaining how she, as a woman, felt both “very feminine” and “very masculine, powerful.” However, unlike Grace Jones, or even their contemporary, Madonna, Lennox played with her gender image without flaunting her sexuality. Uncomfortable with the expectation that women in pop music be sex symbols, she chose not to draw attention to her body in a sexualized way. In doing so, Lennox exercised control over her body and image, offered an alternative sexual persona for her female fans, and challenged the limits imposed by society on representations of femininity.<sup>16</sup> Building on the ways in which disco divas had made a range of sexual and gender expression standard in mainstream popular music, the women of New Wave continued to offer a variety of possibilities for female image-making.

But New Wave, dominated as it was by male acts, offered more in terms of representations of masculinity than it did femininity. Like the music, the visual aspects

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<sup>15</sup> On women in punk and new wave see, for example, Shelia Whiteley, “Daughters of Chaos,” in *Women in Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 95-118 and Renee T. Coulombe “The Insatiable Banshee: Voracious Vocalizing . . . Riot Grrl . . . and the Blues,” in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, eds. Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley (Los Angeles: Carciofoli Verlaghaus, 1999), 257-272.

<sup>16</sup> Quotes and analysis of Lennox’s gender representations borrowed from Gillian Rodger, “Drag, Camp and Gender Subversion in the Music and Videos of Annie Lennox,” *Popular Music* 23, no. 1 (2004): 17-29.

of New Wave challenged the traditional confines of white, male rock and offered a variety of masculine representations that extended the new male images that disco had helped make standard in the mainstream. Many New Wave groups maintained punk's connection to the masculine rock rebel—The Police projected an aggressive punk rock image, while the Talking Heads threw in a bit of mod sophistication, and Devo veered toward the outrageous and strange. But other groups in what is often referred to as the second British Invasion offered flexible constructions of masculinity through their fashion-conscious images, which could surpass even disco in theatricality, androgyny, and expressive individuality.

Disco had helped bring to the American mainstream male expressions of flamboyant fashion and diverse sexuality, and British groups such as Duran Duran, Culture Club, Human League, and Spandau Ballet merely continued to offer alternatives to the aggressive, macho posturing of traditional rock and heavy metal. For example, *Newsweek* described Boy George of Culture Club as a “new-wave Liberace” and a “clotheshorse,” but one who “leaves an oddly homey impression.”<sup>17</sup> But while Boy George “performed gentle, soulful dance cuts . . . decked out in heavy makeup and flowing female frocks,” Duran Duran and many of the other British new pop groups were physically attractive—“almost pretty”—men producing sexually provocative videos in sharp, colorful suits; full, coiffed hair; and mascara, which seemed reminiscent of the mixed bag of masculine ideals put forth by groups like the Bee Gees.<sup>18</sup> These fashion-conscious bands, with their ready embrace of glamour, ostentation, and hedonism, were

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<sup>17</sup> In the article, Boy George even mentioned that he had gotten mail from fans expressing how he makes them feel more comfortable with themselves. See Jim Miller, “British Rock America—Again,” *Newsweek*, 23 January 1984.

<sup>18</sup> Descriptions taken, in part, from Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 297.

popular enough to garner Top 40 hits along with a solid share of the charts, suggesting that the consumption-oriented and expressive masculinity fostered in disco had only gained strength in the 1980s. Yet, the fact that many consumers still found New Wave unusual and resisted its popularity by remaining loyal to more traditional rock acts suggests just how much debates over “proper” masculine image and roles remained unresolved into the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the fact that many New Wave bands with openly gay members made it to the top of the pop charts in the right-wing, anti-gay atmosphere of the 1980s would have been unlikely without the role disco had played in bringing homosexuality into a mainstream frame of reference, however covertly. That the reception of these acts often remained contingent on their gay cultural politics, as it had for Sylvester and the Village People, suggests how conflicted American audiences remained about homosexuality in their popular music.<sup>20</sup>

While audiences remained conflicted over New Wave, many British bands of this persuasion became pop stars in 1980s America because of their exposure on the new music television station, MTV. MTV first aired its 24/7 music video format in August 1981, and, in these early years, relied heavily on British New Wave groups for its content because of Britain’s long-established use of music videos on television, compared to the lack of significant music video production in the United States. In turn, because of MTV’s new influence on pop music, the acts that took hold of the pop charts in the early 1980s were not only male-dominated, they were also overwhelmingly white until 1983,

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<sup>19</sup> See James Lull, “Popular Music: Resistance to New Wave,” *Journal of Communication* 32, no. 1 (March 1982): 121-131. Also helpful in framing my analysis of New Wave as consumption-oriented and alternative to macho masculinity was Stan Hawkins, “The Pet Shop Boys: Musicology, Masculinity, and Banality,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. by Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 118-134.

<sup>20</sup> For further discussion of reception and cultural politics in New Wave, see Aaron Lecklider, “Between Decadence and Denial: Two Studies in Gay Male Politics and 1980s Pop Music,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 16, no. 2 (August 2004): 111-141.

when Michael Jackson's *Thriller* forced MTV to acknowledge the quality of video production in the United States and among black artists (as well as their own implicit racism in programming restrictions).<sup>21</sup> Yet, in the immediate aftermath of "disco sucks," the crossover that defined 1970s disco had significantly diminished with the respective condemnations of disco as both "too black" and "too white" from either side. Indeed, music writer Steve Perry remembered that in the years just after the disco backlash, "the charts had been as deeply segregated as at any time in the rock era."<sup>22</sup>

With most black acts relegated to the R&B charts, rap developed as a predominant musical form both out of and against disco. Over time, rap would come to be seen as the antithesis of the "effeminate" genre of disco, its songs and surrounding culture of hip-hop praised by many, including critic Nelson George, as "a molder of solidly masculine black male acts."<sup>23</sup> But early "disco rap" borrowed directly from disco, often in the most basic of terms, as artists like the Sugarhill Gang and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five sampled disco beats and sounds to use as backing tracks for their unique lyrics and funky grooves. Rappers also developed similar mixing techniques as disco DJs, and as dance culture historian Tim Lawrence has pointed out, "early rap records drew heavily on the rapping and vamping of the likes of [disco artists]," and "the mythical rap-disco divide was also crossed by rapping DJs [who played disco]."<sup>24</sup> Yet, even as rap developed out of disco culture, it also sought to bring a sense of powerful

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<sup>21</sup> For more on history of MTV see Garofalo, *Rockin' Out*, 297-300 and Paul D. Lopes, "Innovation and Diversity in the Popular Music Industry," *American Sociological Review* 57, no. 1 (February 1992): 68.

<sup>22</sup> Steve Perry, "Ain't No Mountain High Enough: The Politics of Crossover," in Simon Frith, ed., *Facing the Music* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 52.

<sup>23</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 192. Quote is in specific reference to major rap producer Russell Simmons, but can be readily applied to rap in a larger sense.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 384. This video shows Sugarhill Gang performing in a disco and for disco dancers: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6gD\\_CwF5YM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6gD_CwF5YM).

masculinity back to black music. Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," considered by many to be the first rap recording, blended lyrics that encouraged dancing with those that celebrated masculine sexual prowess and mocked Superman as "a fairy . . . flyin' through the air in pantyhose."<sup>25</sup> Rap pioneer Grandmaster Flash produced successful songs on the R&B charts that focused on strong social commentary and spoke to the hardship of black life in the inner city, and by the time Run DMC introduced their pared down beats and angry raps and hit it big by sampling rock records in the mid-1980s, rap had solidified its reputation as a rough, macho, often misogynist, and politically aware music.

Rap music projected an emphasis on rough and misogynist masculinity and became a dominant force in black music, but this is not to say that black music suddenly became immune to the complicated and progressive ideas of gender and sexuality disco had helped introduce to mainstream culture. By the early 1990s, rap also featured strong female voices that challenged feminine expectations and maintained a sexual dialogue with their male counterparts in ways that built on the complicated black feminisms disco divas had introduced to a broad audience.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the smooth R&B sounds of men like Luther Vandross and Lionel Richie continued the of blending masculine sexual virility with romantic love and emotional sentiment best exemplified in disco by Barry White. Most significantly, while black rappers engaged in a project of reclaiming patriarchal black masculinity, Michael Jackson and Prince were busy becoming superstars by confounding definitions of "masculine," "black," and "heterosexual."

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<sup>25</sup> Lyrics borrowed from <http://www.lyricsondemand.com/onehitwonders/rappersdelightlyrics.html>.

<sup>26</sup> See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Venise T. Berry, "Feminine or Masculine: The Conflicting Nature of Female Images in Rap Music," in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, eds. Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 183-201; and Gwendolyn Pough, "Hip-Hop Soul Divas and Rap Music: Critiquing the Love That Hate Produced," in *Black Women and Music: More than the Blues*, eds Eileen M. Hayes and Linda F. Williams (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 23-50.

The dance-oriented pop of stars like Prince, Michael Jackson, and Madonna—which many considered disco if only by another name—most blatantly continued the gender and sexual disruptions that disco had made so readily accessible to a mainstream audience. Jackson became the king of pop through a presentation of androgyny that played with stereotypes of black manhood while situating himself squarely within a tradition of black dance music. Cultural studies scholar Kobena Mercer has called Jackson “a spectacle of racial and sexual indeterminacy” and has praised him (along with Vandross and Teddy Pendergrass) for “disclos[ing] the ‘soft side’ of black masculinity (and this is the side we like!).”<sup>27</sup> Prince blended aesthetics of pop with rock and R&B and wore costumes as outrageous as black bikini briefs with thigh-high stockings while wielding his guitar in a highly phallic manner and singing exceptionally lewd lyrics in a “weirdly vulnerable falsetto.”<sup>28</sup> He took the ideals of the sexual revolution to their extreme through lyrics and performances that suggested a “religious belief in salvation through sex,” and blatantly challenged socially defined stereotypes with lyrics that asked, “Am I black or white/Am I straight of gay?” even as he “project[ed] an odd blend of defiance and vulnerability.”<sup>29</sup> As music critic Nelson George described, “The two greatest black artists of the decade . . . ran fast and far both from blackness and conventional images of male sexuality.”<sup>30</sup> George went on to praise Jackson and Prince as two of the most important black artists who set admirable standards for black musicians in how they retained autonomy and control over their careers as well as a connection to a history of

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<sup>27</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*” and “Black Masculinity and the Sexual Politics of Race,” both in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 33-51 and 131-170, quoted from 35 and 140.

<sup>28</sup> Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 153.

<sup>29</sup> Jim Miller, “The Naughty Prince of Rock,” *Newsweek*, 21 December 1981, 75.

<sup>30</sup> George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 174.



“authentic” black dance music, but he could do so only “despite the unfortunate impact of their imagery.”<sup>31</sup> As was the case for the disco era’s representation of masculinity, certain black cultural critics in the 1980s remained conflicted by a black masculinity that did not conform to one of a black nationalist philosophy, even as these masculine representations added up to superstardom in the pop music world.

Madonna, arguably the biggest dance music and pop star since her chart debut in 1983, similarly challenged traditional ideas of femininity in the ways she appropriated conventional feminine markers in an ironic and self-empowering fashion, engaged in androgyny, and performed an explicit and aggressive female sexuality.<sup>32</sup> The success of the disco divas placed women in a position to impact popular music significantly in a range of genres in the 1980s and 1990s. From Janet Jackson to Whitney Houston, Olivia Newton John to Mariah Carey, women had a larger voice in the American musical landscape than ever before. And while the musical women of the era did not completely abandon the traditional feminine confines of emotions and domesticity, they also tended to speak straightforwardly about sex, sexual pleasure, and sexual control. Madonna was merely the most outrageous of this new cohort of musical women, and pushed the bounds of acceptable sexual expression further than any of her contemporaries. More outrageous and controversial than Annie Lennox, more mainstream than Grace Jones, Madonna self-consciously performed her gender and sexuality in ways that were aware of the unstable nature of such categories and with distinct intention to shock, but her explicit sexuality built upon the groundwork laid by the disco diva’s engagement with female sexual

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>32</sup> For a recent collection that synthesizes and expands the vast scholarship on Madonna see Santiago Fouz-Hernández and Freya Jarman-Ivens, eds., *Madonna’s Drowned Worlds: New Approaches to Her Cultural Transformations, 1983-2003* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

liberation. Madonna's claim that, in her early years, critics belittled her as a "little disco tart" reflects not only her connection to the rapidly retreating musical designation but also that critics identified her engagement with female sexuality with the threatening and possibly objectifying sexuality of the disco diva.<sup>33</sup>

Madonna, Prince, and Michael Jackson—the three biggest pop stars of the 1980s—put on performances of gender that called into question the supposed naturalness of gendered forms of sexual desire, attraction, and identity. And while they were perhaps more self-conscious about their gender as performance and their manipulations of standards, they remained indebted to the disco boom that preceded their fame. Beyond the adaptation of disco's danceable tropes, these performers illustrated the permanence of how sexual revolution and liberation movements had affected American society and its music. As the chroniclers of disco group Chic claimed, "Madonna was the end product of the politics of disco"—having taken the freedoms of a liberated era, she manipulated and mass-marketed them to become a superstar.<sup>34</sup> The popularity of Madonna, Jackson, and Prince showed that American society had come to accept—even expect—that the rebellion, debates, and redefinition of gender precipitated by women's liberation and sexual revolution would define their everyday lives and entertainment. Indeed, musicologist Susan McClary explains well how (post)modern pop artists like Madonna, Prince, and Jackson, "are both self-conscious and unapologetic about the constructedness of their music and image," a practice that marks them as part of a moment influenced by the movements that had developed such concepts and had first made disco such a craze.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> "Disco tart" quote taken from Echols, "Shaky Ground," 161.

<sup>34</sup> Daryl Easlea, *Everybody Dance: Chic and the Politics of Disco* (London: Helter Skelter, 2004), 232.

<sup>35</sup> McClary, *Conventional Wisdom*, 153. Her analysis of Prince, 153-157, was very helpful to my discussion here.

And pop artists continue to make mainstream and intentionally commercial music a space where gender identities remain malleable and not strictly defined. They, like disco, move such acts of rebellion and resistance outside of genres like rock and roll and subcultural music that root themselves in such qualities by definition and give significance and meaning to mass commercial culture that many tend to disparage or dismiss as inconsequential.

That pop stars like Prince, Jackson, and Madonna garnered numerous Top 40 hits speaks to how the gender challenges of a previous generation continued and that mainstream listeners had come to accept the idea of gender as performative and malleable. That they also garnered controversy and critique demonstrates that the tensions surrounding this instability also remained unresolved, and such tensions remained so through the 1990s and into the new millennium, especially when it came to concerns over female sexuality. By the mid-1990s, the assertive and self-defined sexuality originally stressed by radical feminists and elaborated upon in popular culture by disco divas and Madonna had been appropriated by the young women who called themselves the Third Wave as well as the women of pop music. Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera became superstars by breaking away from their *Mickey Mouse Club* innocence and performing sexually explicit music in revealing clothing. The Spice Girls invaded American pop from England and promoted a “girl power” anthem they believed to be redefining feminism for the ‘90s, complete with a different persona for each of the six Girls. These female pop stars of the 1990s were criticized in the same way as the sexually expressive and commercial female performers before them, as inconsequential pop. But they also helped a generation of young women—myself included—become

comfortable with our sexuality and empowered by the performance of it, learning that it was nothing to be ashamed of and something over which we alone should have control.

Yet, concepts like sexual freedom and feminism are never so cut and dry for young women, as the recent controversies over today's young pop stars make clear. When is too young for a teenage girl to become sexually aware and demonstrative of her sexuality? Should a young female star be expected to act as a role model to legions of (pre)teenage fans? Can one be a positive role model while also exploring and performing her growing sexual awareness or should she present herself as chaste and pure so as not to offend young girls and their parents? These are all issues underlying the variety of responses to, for example, 15-year-old Miley Cyrus posting pictures of herself on MySpace that revealed her bra and appearing in *Vanity Fair* in a "provocative" photo that shows her from the side, with a bare back, her front covered only by a sheet she holds around herself. Such a controversy makes us wonder if America remains mired in traditional concepts of female purity and continues to need public female figures performing assertive and confident sexual roles to help empower others. Or, conversely, if female sexual empowerment has gone too far, and fled too far from feminism, in that it endangers young women who feel compelled to be sexy but don't necessarily understand how sexual agency coincides with other measures of empowerment. Perhaps it is true, as cultural critic Angela McRobbie has recently argued, that female empowerment through a discourse of individualism and choice, which has become increasingly focused around the supposed subversion of consumer products and sexual agency, is not as empowering

or subversive as we once believed—that it merely acts as a substitute for feminism and a way for institutions to prevent a women’s movement from re-emerging.<sup>36</sup>

Finding the most productive balance between feminist ideals, individual empowerment, and female sexuality is a difficult—perhaps impossible—debate made only more complicated by the role of popular culture, but it is by no means a new debate. Whichever interpretation one takes on feminism, sexual liberation, and popular culture, we need to look to the 1970s and disco to find its genesis as well as that of a complicated but increasingly public debate over masculine sexuality and gay liberation. While certainly not without precedent in popular music, the ways in which disco opened a space for unconventional gender and sexual expression to reveal its performative nature during a time of sexual revolution, liberation, and human potential helped such controversial ideas and debates reach a wide and diverse audience actively working through the confusion of change. Disco became popular because of how the ideas underlying such movements had become more acceptable to the large American mainstream and helped to make the ideas palatable to its broad audience, especially in the variety of representations it encompassed. It offered a critique of “traditional” masculinity and a new definition of macho; it interrogated and disrupted the boundaries of categories such as “straight” and “gay”; and it made female sexual agency something to be expected and celebrated but also defined by each individual woman. Disco certainly represented no utopia of freedom and acceptance, and the progressive change it did embody remains tenuous and far from complete, but it deserves recognition for the important role it played in making these ideas part of our mainstream musical landscape and everyday life.

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<sup>36</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009).

## Discography

This discography lists all films, videos and albums consulted during the researching and writing of this dissertation. For select singles used in lyrical analysis, please consult the appropriate footnotes in the text.

### Albums (alphabetical by artist)

#### Bee Gees

*Bee Gees Greatest*. 800-071-2. Published and © 1979 PolyGram Records. Compact disc, 2 disc set.

#### Chic

*Chic*. 80407-2. Published by Cotillion Music/Kreimers Music, BMI. © 1977 Atlantic Recording Corp. All Songs arranged and produced by Bernard Edwards, Nile Rodgers, and Kenny Lehman for Turtle Productions. Compact disc.

*C'est Chic*. 81552-2. Published and © 1978 Atlantic Recording Corp. Produced by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, for the Chic Organization, Ltd. Compact disc.

*Risqué*. 80406-2. Published and © 1979 Atlantic Records. All songs produced by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, for the Chic Organization, Ltd. Compact disc.

*Real People*. SD 16016. Published and © 1980 Atlantic Recording Corp. Produced by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, for the Chic Organization, Ltd. LP.

*Take It Off*. SD 19323. Published and © 1981 Atlantic Recording Corp. Produced by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, for the Chic Organization, Ltd. LP.

#### Gaynor, Gloria

*Never Can Say Goodbye*. M3G 4982. Published and © 1975 MGM Records. Produced by Tony Bongiovi, Meco Monardo and Jay Ellis for DCA Records Corp. LP.

*Love Tracks*. PD-1-6184. Published and © 1978 Polydor. Produced by Dino Pekariss in association with Freddie Perren for Grand Slam Productions. LP.

*I Have a Right*. PD-1-6231. Published and © 1979 Polydor. Produced by Dino Fekaris in association with Freddie Perren for Grand Slam Productions. LP.

*Stories*. PD-1-6274. Published and © 1980 Polydor. Produced by Dino Fekaris in association with Freddie Perrin for Grand Slam Productions. LP.

#### Jones, Grace

*Portfolio*. 422-842 614-2. Published and © 1977 Island Records. Compact disc.

*Fame*. ILPS 9525. Published 1978 Island Records. Produced by Tom Moulton for Beam Junction Productions. LP.

*Nightclubbing*. 422-842 368-2. Published and © 1981 Island Records. Compact disc.

*Slave to the Rhythm*. 422-842 612-2. Published and © 1987 Island Records. Compact

disc.

*The Best of Grace Jones, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Masters/The Millennium Collection.* B0000729-02. Published and © 2003 The Island Def Jam Music Group. Compact disc.

KC and the Sunshine Band

*Part 3 . . . And More.* R2 71811. Original sound recordings published 1976, 1977, 1979, 1980, 1993 TK Records. Reissue/compilation published and © 1994 Rhino Records. Compact disc.

Labelle

*Nightbirds.* Epic 33075. Published and © 1974 CBS Records. Compact disc.

*Phoenix.* PE 33579. Published and © 1975 CBS Records. LP.

*Chameleon.* PE 34189. © 1976 CBS Records. LP.

Pattie LaBelle and the Bluebelles

*Over the Rainbow.* SPY 45001-2. Published 2002 Atlantic Recording Corp. © 2002 Spy Records. Digitally remastered compact disc.

*Sweethearts of the Apollo.* COL-5092. © 1995 Collectibles Record Corp. Compact disc.

Ritchie Family, The

*Give Me a Break.* NBLP 7223. Published and © 1980 Casablanca Record and Filmworks. Produced by Jacques Morali for Can't Stop Productions. LP.

Sister Sledge

*We Are Family.* R2 71587. Reissue/Compilation Published 1979, 1993 & 1995, © 1979 & 1995 Atlantic Recording Corp. Compact disc.

*All American Girls.* WOU 6027. Published 1981 and 2007 Atlantic Recording Corp. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp. © 2007 Wounded Bird Records. Compact disc.

Staton, Candi

*Candi Staton: 2 Classic Albums on 1 CD: Young Hearts Run Free/House of Love.* SPY 46002-2. Published 2002 Warner Bros. Records. © 2002 Spy Records. Compact disc.

Summer, Donna

*Love to Love You Baby.* 822 792-2. © 1975 PolyGram Records. Compact disc.

*A Love Trilogy.* 822 793-2. Published and © 1976 PolyGram Records. A Say Yes Production by Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellotte. Compact disc.

*Four Seasons of Love.* 826 236-2. Published and © 1976 PolyGram Records. Compact disc.

*I Remember Yesterday.* NBLP 7056. Published and © 1977 Casablanca Record and Filmworks. LP.

*Once Upon a Time.* 826 238-2. Originally Published and © 1977 Casablanca Record and Filmworks. Published 1977 PolyGram. Compact disc.

*Live and More.* 811 123-2. Published and © 1978 PolyGram Records. Compact disc.

*Bad Girls*. 822 557-2 M-1. Published and © 1979 Casablanca Record and Filmworks.  
Compact disc.  
*On the Radio: Donna Summer Greatest Hits Volumes I & II*. P2 22558. Published 1975,  
1977, 1978, 1979 Casablanca Record and Filmworks. © 1979 Casablanca Record  
and Filmworks. Compact disc.  
*She Works Hard for the Money*. 812 265-2. © 1983 Phonogram International. Compact  
disc.  
*Endless Summer: Donna Summer's Greatest Hits*. 314 526 178-2. © 1994 PolyGram  
Records. Compact disc.

#### Sylvester

*All I Need*. M-1005. © 1982 Megatone Records. Audiocassette.  
*The Original Hits*. FCD-7710-2. Published and © 1989 Fantasy. Compact disc.

#### A Taste of Honey

*Another Taste*. SOO-11951. © 1979 Capitol Records. Produced by Fonce Mizell &  
Larry Mizell for Skyhigh Productions. LP.  
*Classic Masters: A Taste of Honey*. 72435-37258-2-2. Digitally remastered compilation  
published and © 2001 Capitol Records. Compact disc.

#### Various Artists

*Disco Hits Volume 1*. R2 71094. Compilation published and © 1992 Rhino Records.  
Compact disc.  
*Disco Hits Volume 2*. R2 71095. Compilation published and © 1992 Rhino Records.  
Compact disc.  
*Disco Hits Volume 3*. R2 71096. Compilation published and © 1992 Rhino Records.  
Compact disc.  
*Disco Hits Volume 4*. R2 71667. Compilation published and © 1994 Rhino Records.  
Compact disc.  
*Disco Hits Volume 5*. R2 71668. Compilation published and © 1994 Rhino Records.  
Compact disc.  
*Disco Hits Volume 6*. R2 71669. Compilation published and © 1994 Rhino Records.  
Compact disc.  
*The Disco Years Volume One: Turn the Beat Around (1974-1978)*. R2 70984.  
Compilation published and © 1990 Rhino Records. Compact disc.  
*The Disco Years Volume Two: On the Beat (1978-1982)*. R2 70985. Compilation  
published and © 1990 Rhino Records. Compact disc.  
*The Disco Years Volume Three: Boogie Fever*. R2 70274. Compilation published and ©  
1992 Rhino Records. Compact disc.  
*The Disco Years Volume Four: Lost in Music*. R2 70275. Compilation published and ©  
1992 Rhino Records. Compact disc.  
*The Disco Years Volume Five: Must Be the Music*. R2 70276. Compilation published  
and © 1992 Rhino Records. Compact disc.  
*Experience Music Project Presents Funk Blast! A Collection of Classic Funk*. EMPCD  
002. © 2000 Experience Music Project. Compact disc, 2 disc set.  
*Rolling Stone the Hitmakers of the '70s: Disco*. B0010121-02. Published 2007



Universal Music Enterprises. © 2007 Compass Productions. Compact disc.  
*Saturday Night Fever: Original Movie Soundtrack*. 42282 5389 2. Published 1977  
PolyGram International Music. Digitally remastered compact disc, 1995.

#### Village People

*Village People*. NBL5-7064. Produced by Jacques Morali for Can't Stop Productions.  
Published 1977 Casablanca Record and Filmworks. Audiocassette.

*Macho Man*. 314 532 170 2. Published and © 1978 PolyGram Records. Compact disc.  
*Cruisin'*. LP-1784-CD. Published 1978 Casablanca Record and Filmworks. Compact  
disc.

*Go West*. NBL-7144. Produced by Jacques Morali for Can't Stop Productions.

Published 1979 Casablanca Record and Filmworks. Audiocassette.

*Live and Sleazy*. 314 520 226-2. Published 1979 PolyGram Records. © 1994 PolyGram  
Records. Compact disc.

*Renaissance*. 7551744772-2. Originally published 1981 BMG Entertainment. Published  
1998 BMG Special Products. Compact disc.

#### Walt Disney Records

*Mickey Mouse Disco*. 60353-2. Published 1979, 1995 Buena Vista Pictures Distribution.  
Distributed by Walt Disney Pictures. © Walt Disney Company. Compact Disc.

#### White, Barry

*Can't Get Enough*. 314 532 165-2. Published and © 1974 PolyGram Records. Digitally  
remastered compact disc.

*Barry White's Greatest Hits*. 822 782-2. Compilation © 1975 PolyGram Records.  
Compact disc.

*Barry White's Greatest Hits, Volume 2*. 822 783-2. Compilation published 1981  
PolyGram Records. Produced and arranged by Barry White, a Soul Unlimited  
Production. Compact disc.

#### Film and Video

54. DVD. Directed by Mark Christopher. 1998, Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home  
Entertainment, D6194.

*Airplane!* DVD. Directed by Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker. 1980,  
Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2005.

*Can't Stop the Music*. DVD. Directed by Nancy Walker. 1980, Troy, MI: Anchor Bay  
Entertainment, 2002.

*Car Wash*. DVD. Directed by Michael Schultz. 1976, Universal City, CA: Universal  
Studios, 2003.

*Grace Jones: A One Man Show*. VHS. Directed by Jean Paul Goude. © 1982 Island  
Pictures, © 1991 Island Visual Arts.

*Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. VHS. Directed by Richard Brooks. Universal City, CA:  
MCA Disco Vision, 1977.

*Mamma Mia! The Movie*. DVD. Directed by Phyllida Lloyd. Universal City, CA:  
Universal Studio Home Entertainment, 2008.

*Roller Boogie*. DVD. Directed by Mark L. Lester. 1979, Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2004.  
*Saturday Night Fever*. DVD, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Collector's Edition. Directed by John Badham. 1977, Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2007.  
*Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. DVD. Directed by Michael Schultz. 1978, Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2003.  
*Thank God It's Friday*. VHS. Directed by Robert Klane. 1978, Culver City, CA: Columbia Tristar Home Video, 1997.

UCLA Film and Television Archive

*Starsky and Hutch*. "Discomania." Directed by Arthur Marks. ABC, original airdate 12 September 1978.  
20/20. "The Disco Phenomenon." Excerpt from episode dated 18 July 1978.  
Commercial for Darci Covergirl Disco Set. 1979.

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*Disco Fever*. VBH0207. Directed by Lamar Card. USA: Group 1 International, 1978.  
*Disco Step-by-Step*  
vol. 6, show 22, "Sharon William, Bee Gees." VXC 2008. 1977.  
vol. 1, show 30, "Andy Gibb, Yvonne Elliman." VXC2011. 1977.  
vol. 9, cable #1, "Fist O' Funk Orchestra." VXC 2008. 1978.

*Soul Train*

episode 122. VXB 9446. 17 November 1974.  
episode 123. VXB 9447. 14 December 1974.  
episode 124. VXB 9448. 14 December 1974.  
episode 164. VXB 6652. 16 November 1975.  
episode 204. VXB 5815. 14 November 1976.  
episode 205. VXB 5816. 11 December 1976.  
episode 244. VXB 5853. 13 December 1977.  
episode 281. VXB 5874. 26 November 1978.  
episode 283. VXB 5876. 26 December 1978.  
episode 299. VXB 9224. 18 March 1979.  
episode 318. VXB 6667. 30 January 1980, re-edited.

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