

# THE DEEPER MEANING OF DISCO

IT WAS DONE, DUSTED AND PUMPED DRY BY CONSUMERISM AND FASHION. ROCKERS MET IN STADIUMS TO DESTROY IT, PUNKS GOT LOUD AND FIERCE TO TRY AND SHAKE IT OFF. YET VISIT AN AVERAGE WEDDING, CLUB OR HOUSE PARTY, AND YOU HAVE TO SAY IT. DISCO SURVIVED. SURELY, YOU'D ASK, THAT'S THE BEST REASON TO IGNORE IT? AND USUALLY, YOU'D BE RIGHT. BUT IN THE SPIRIT OF SEASONAL GIVING, *DCM* DROPS THE NEEDLE ON THE RECORD AGAIN, TO GIVE DISCO ONE MORE SPIN. AND AS **CHRIS WRIGHT** DONS HIS SILVER SEQUINS AND PLATFORMS SHOES TO TALK TO A FIGURE OF DANCEFLOOR ROYALTY, HE DISCOVERS THAT DISCO JUST MAY HAVE STUCK WITH US FOR A REASON

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



**You could make a case that disco is the most vacuous musical movement ever devised. Look at the clothes! Do the Village People look like people with something intelligent to say? And listen to the lyrics. "It was so entertaining when the boogie started to explode"; "Boogie yourself to death"; "Clams on the half shell and rollerskates, rollerskates."**

It would be easy to make that case. But you would be wrong. For while it is true that disco is beloved (or be-loathed) for its escapism, for its meaningless love of the beat, and for its costumes and fluffiness, it is easy to forget that it also emerged from the bleakest of roots. After all, if music is going to be based so solidly on escapism, then there must have been something pretty serious to escape *from*. In short, disco needs defending.

Granted, it has driven people mad for decades. The original movement triggered a backlash so vicious that in July of 1979, when the Chicago White Sox baseball team filled a crate with disco records and blew it up with dynamite on the ballpark as a mid-game promotion, many in the crowd of over 50,000 people had to eventually be dispersed by riot police. There was a well-known DJ at the time, Steve Dahl, who formed

his own army called The Insane Coho Lips, which rallied around a strident mission statement: "Dedicated to the eradication of the dreaded musical disease known as DISCO."

What did disco do to deserve this? Why, to this day, is it mocked and derided, something that most of us only dance to with a sense of self-mockery when wasted at a wedding? Something's not right here. It's time to stand up for disco.

#### SOLID GOLD ROOTS

One of the most absurd misconceptions about disco is that it didn't mean anything, that it was all silliness, teased hair and spangles. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

It is easy to forget, at this nuanced distance, just what a pitiful hellhole New York represented four decades ago. "In the early Seventies, the words 'New York City' became a shorthand code for everything that was wrong with America," writes Peter Shapiro in his passionate defence of disco, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret*



FROM ITS HEYDAY IN MANHATTAN'S STUDIO 54 (RIGHT) TO A VICIOUS BACKLASH IN THE LATE 1970S, LED BY DJ STEVE DAHL (BELOW), DISCO HAS HAD A WILD RIDE THROUGH MUSICAL HISTORY  
PREVIOUS PAGE: PEOPLE DANCING AT THE DISCO CLUB NEW YORK NEW YORK IN NEW YORK CITY IN 1978

PHOTOS: CORBIS (MAIN); GETTY IMAGES





*History of Disco.* Writing in *The New York Times*, Vincent Canby went even further. "New York City has become a metaphor for what looks like the last days of American civilization. It's run by fools. Its citizens are at the mercy of its criminals," he wrote in 1974. "The air is foul. The traffic is impossible."

This all felt a very long way from the peace-and-love idealism of the 1960s, but that was largely due to the fact that, unlike the previous decade, nobody had any money anymore. By now, the Vietnam War had escalated terribly, civil rights marches had been replaced by race riots, and recession had kicked in. On a national scale, there was a growing sense of disillusionment.

Alongside this, some influential demographic changes were taking place. New York in particular, and Chicago and Philadelphia too, were attracting millions of poor rural African-Americans. The process was exacerbated by a change in the law in 1965, which saw more Asians, Latin Americans and Afro-Caribbeans entering America. Yet as Shapiro explains, these unskilled workers arrived just at the time when the manufacturing industries that could have supported them began to unravel and decline.

As recession times hit, it became a vicious circle. New York, nearing bankruptcy, fired more than 63,000 municipal employees in 1975. The white middle class population of New York fled to the suburbs, taking their tax contributions with them, meaning the city's tax revenues shrank further. Services were cut and strikes were started by sanitation workers, firemen, police. Murder in New York jumped by 173 percent between 1966 and 1973, and the police themselves were, in a great many cases, corrupt. As another *New York Times* scribe, David Burnham, wrote, "The fear is visible."

This is where disco started. Without the misery and the pain, you would never have had the music. And this is its great contradiction. "Disco is all shiny, glittery surfaces; high heels and luscious lipstick; jam-packed jeans and cut pecs;

lush, soaring, swooping strings and Latin razzamatazz; cocaine rush and Quaalude wobble," writes Shapiro. While disco saw the height of glamour, decadence and indulgence, he argues, it happened for a reason. "Whatever its veneer of elegance and sophistication, disco was born, maggot-like, from the rotten remains of the Big Apple."

Equally, the way we think of disco today has little in common with the way it was viewed in its infancy. Now, we see innocence, fun and inebriation.

**"NEW YORK CITY HAS BECOME A METAPHOR FOR WHAT LOOKS LIKE THE LAST DAYS OF AMERICAN CIVILIZATION. IT'S RUN BY FOOLS"**

We laugh at it, and ourselves, as we dance. All of which is fine, yet it is odd to think that it "could only have emerged from the dark underground of a society teetering on the brink of collapse," as Shapiro argues.

The fabulous book *Disco* chronicles the era in great big slabs of garish 1970s colour. Its foreword has this to say: "Music is always indicative of the social climate. So what could the social climate have been that acted as a catalyst for disco music and the clothing, that no designer had previously



BY 1973, THE VIETNAM WAR HAD ENDED AND THE US WAS PLUNGED INTO RECESSION, INCLUDING NEW YORK CITY (LEFT). DISCO WAS TO BE SOMEWHAT OF A SAVIOUR, WITH NIGHTCLUBS WITH DANCE FLOORS AND DJ BOOTHS POPPING UP ALL OVER THE CITY, INCLUDING THE RENOWNED NIGHTCLUB STUDIO 54 (BELOW)



PHOTOS: CORBIS (MAIN); WILL BLANCHE/NARA (1970S NEW YORK)

imagined?" The writer then describes the economic decline of the early 1970s, and the need for inexpensive relief from the drudgery of everyday life.

She continues, "I am glad to have been there to witness the result of someone having the brilliant idea of completely changing music entertainment venues by first putting in a dance floor, and then a makeshift booth which was more than occasionally made from a storage closet, converted by cutting off the top half of the door."

This was the birth of the DJ booth, in a club within which the cover charge would be modest, if there was one at all. "I always felt that nothing could be more gratifying for an entertainer than to know that you are the reason that people are out on the floor not just to dance, but to shake off the worries and tensions of their day." The author of this foreword? Gloria Gaynor, singer of the most famous and revered disco anthem of all, "I Will Survive". To understand disco better, we sought to track her down.

### THE GREAT SURVIVOR

*Discovery Channel Magazine* speaks to Gloria Gaynor by phone from New Jersey, where she is recovering from a knee operation. She is apologetic at being late for the call, having had car trouble. That's okay, we say, feeling a light note

of reassurance that a multi-platinum singing star still grumbles about mundane things like the rest of us. Bad day? Oh, I'll survive.

But what a voice she has, even now. Deep and velvety, rounded and assertive. It is a slow melt of a voice, and a precious commodity. Although Gaynor has written many songs, it's through performing them that she has made her living.

Gloria Fowles, to give her the name she started out with, grew up with modest means, the fifth of seven children born to her mother by three men, none of whom stuck around very long. She described her mum as having had more relationships with men than any woman would wish for in a lifetime. And not all of them were wise choices. One molested Gloria when she was 12 years old. It was the second time that she'd been abused by a man. Sadly, it wouldn't be the last.

Her childhood home was known as 150 and a half Howard Street in Newark, New Jersey, a Harry Potter-ish address that stems from the fact her house sat behind number 150, and was only accessed by walking through the middle of it, past the people who lived there. Gaynor lived on the ground floor of 150 and a half, with other families on the next floor and in the attic. In her apartment, intended for a family of two, lived eight people, with no bath or shower and no heat. Bathing



took place in a tin tub on the kitchen floor. The kitchen was also where she slept, along with her brother Arthur. It was hardly a childhood of riches but, as she says, it didn't matter. "Children never mind or even know that they are poor, as long as they are loved, which we certainly were," she says now.

Drifting through childhood, she felt bored, and boring. "I felt that if all the interesting things that had happened to me were written on the head of a pin, there would still be room left for the Gettysburg Address."

**"DISCO WAS GREAT MUSIC IN ITS PUREST FORM. AND BY THAT I MEAN, CLEAN LYRICS AND A GREAT BEAT — AND JUST GOOD MUSIC. IT WAS GREAT BECAUSE IT IS THE FIRST AND ONLY MUSIC IN HISTORY TO BE EMBRACED BY PEOPLE OF EVERY RACE, CREED, COLOUR, NATIONALITY AND AGE GROUP"**

But like many people before and since, her life was transformed by music. Holding down jobs at Bambergers Department Store and Brown's Beauty World Shop, she got her break through a combination of luck and ability. She used to sing at a friend's house where she babysat, and noticed the footsteps above her head stopped when she did so.

So began a game she played for four or five days: stop the footsteps by singing. A few nights later, she and her brother went to a Newark nightclub called The Cadillac, to watch Eddie McClendon and the Pacesetters. To her surprise, during the set, the bandleader called her from the audience on stage, where she sang *Save Your Love For Me* by Nancy Wilson to great applause, and sufficient acclaim that she was asked to join the band. The man whose footsteps she'd been stopping

with a song? He was the manager of the club, who had spotted her in the crowd.

Making your way on the music circuit is not easy, and the next few years were a procession of tours, 10pm to 4am sets, unpredictable money, disreputable agents, drummer boyfriends, changing line-ups — and guitarists who doubled as the van driver. She called this the "Chitterlings Circuit". "It means that you've made so little money and been so poor, that all you could afford to eat is hog guts." The band names

alone carry the feel of a bygone era of smoke-filled lounges and session musicians, of keyboard players who gave themselves the middle name "Hammond", of saxophonists called Sport and Grover and Junior. After Eddie McClendon and the Pacesetters, came Cleave Nickerson and the Soul Satisfiers, then Unsilent Majority

featuring Miss GG, and then City Life With GG.

If it sounds a romantic, picaresque existence, it wasn't. One day, at Fudgy's in Scarsdale, New York, a man was shot in front of Gaynor while she was onstage. Another time, in rural Maryland, in a scene straight out of *The Blues Brothers*, they turned up with all their disco finery, to find that the clientele only liked country music. The argument over payment escalated, until they were given 20 minutes by the police to leave town.

Yet when *DCM* asks her about this time, she remembers it fondly. "I really feel that it is something that is missed by young artists," she says, "They make a record today, and tomorrow they are a huge star on stage in front of hundreds and thousands of people." She sees this instant fame less

as an asset, but really as a disability. "I had a chance to hone my craft before I got to that position," she says. "I got to learn how to actually sing. How to form words so that people understand what I'm singing," she says. "How to stretch my range, how to work an audience, how to work the stage — and how to *appear*. All of these things I learned, before anybody could ever call me a star."

Along the way she changed her name to Gloria Gaynor, a name suggested by record executive Johnny Nash, for no other reason than the pleasing alliteration of the double G. Having started out singing soul and R&B, in 1974 she found success with the song "Honey Bee", considered one of the early standards of disco — followed later that year by "Never Can Say Goodbye", a Clifton Davis-penned song first performed by The Jackson Five. The album that featured these two hits went gold, and was the first ever to be made of nonstop programmed dance music.

"I guess it was a milestone in the story of the new kind of disco music everyone was going for," she says. The years of graft paid off. In 1975, Gaynor was elected Queen of the Discos by the International Association of Discotheques Disc Jockeys, an event which might sound twee today, but led to such crowds when she was crowned at New York's Club Les Jardins in March 1975, that the police had to rope off the streets.

So what does disco mean to her now? "Disco, I thought, was great music in its purest form," she recalls. "And by that I mean clean lyrics and a great beat — and just good music. It was great because it is the first and only music in history ever to be embraced by people of every race, creed, colour, nationality and age group"

But why, we ask, was it so embraced: was it the simplicity of it? "Yeah," she says. "Just fun music. Everybody has a time in their life, probably every week, when they want to just have fun — to release the tension of the day and the week, and just loosen up and enjoy themselves until they have to go back to work on Monday. That's what the music did."



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

NEW YORK CITY WAS THE EPICENTRE OF DISCO, WITH CLUBS SUCH AS 2001 ODYSSEY IN BROOKLYN (ABOVE) AND STUDIO 54 IN MANHATTAN (FAR RIGHT) DRAWING STYLISH DANCE-LOVING CROWDS IN THEIR DROVES

RIGHT: GLORIA GAYNOR PERFORMS ON STAGE, LONDON, 1975





## THE CASE FOR DISCO

And so it comes down to this. Does disco deserve to be taken seriously or not? Let the trial begin. First, the defense:

### DISCO BALLS

THEY MIGHT BE THE HEIGHT OF CHEESINESS, BUT IS THERE ANY PROP THAT MORE INSTANTLY — AND FLASHILY — SHOUTS, "IT'S PARTY TIME"? AND WE ARE WILLING TO BET THAT A THIRD OF OUR READERS HAD THEIR FIRST KISS UNDER THE TWINKLY TWEENESS OF A SCHOOL DISCO. FUN FACT: THEY WERE ACTUALLY INVENTED WAY BACK IN 1917, AND WERE KNOWN AS MYRIAD REFLECTORS

### "STAYIN' ALIVE"

THE CLUE IS IN THE NAME — THIS SONG HAS LITERALLY SAVED LIVES. HOW COME? IT'S USED BY CPR CLASSES AS A SHORTHAND FOR HOW TO TIME CHEST COMPRESSIONS



### "GET LUCKY"

THAT SUMMER HIT BY DAFT PUNK AND PHARRELL WILLIAMS IN 2013? THAT WAS A MODERN FUNK SONG WITH DISCO BLOOD BUBBLING IN ITS VEINS. IT WAS UNIVERSALLY LOVED BY CRITICS WHO DECLARED: "WE'VE CAUGHT SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER AGAIN." AND YES, THAT IS DISCO LEGEND NILE RODGERS FROM CHIC PLAYING GUITAR. HE ALSO CO-WROTE THE TRACK

### YOU SHOULD BE DANCING, YEAH

IT'S TEMPTING TO RELEGATE DISCO DANCE MOVES TO THE SINGLE, SWEATY POINTED FINGER OF JOHN TRAVOLTA IN SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER, BUT NOTHING COULD BE FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH. FROM "THE HUSTLE" TO "THE FUNKY CHICKEN" AND "THE BUS STOP", THERE'S A MEDLEY OF DANCE MOVES FOR ALL LEVELS OF SKILL. RHYTHMICALLY CHALLENGED? TRY THE BUMP, WHICH ENCOURAGES YOU TO BUMP INTO YOUR PARTNER'S HIP

yet the band Chic decided they should be kept in, because of the impact that exceptionally deep bass had in dance clubs. Their record "Dance, Dance, Dance" was the first to feature such sub-bass tones.

In disco, the musicians who recorded the tracks were just a starting point to the experience. Increasingly, the DJ became equally important, then in turn the sound system and the crowd. "The almost symbiotic relationship between crowd and

**THE RESULT WAS A HEADY CONCOCTION OF SWEATY BODIES, INTOXICATION AND THUMPING MUSIC, WHICH HE WRITES "ALL CONSPIRED TO CREATE A HEATED SENSE OF NEWNESS"**

DJ became one of the hallmarks of disco," notes Shapiro. The result was a heady concoction of sweaty bodies, intoxication and thumping music, which he writes "all conspired to create a heated sense of newness, a sense that nothing existed outside that room."

There were several musical flourishes that we associate with disco: the thumping bass, the up-tempo drum beats (more often than not punctuated by computerized handclaps), the soaring, hyperactive strings, the over-the-top vocals — the hissing open hi-hat cymbals that one still hears in dance music today.

Alongside these technical dimensions were the human ones — and a variety of social movements around race and sexuality. Disco is, through its background, a black movement, and also a gay movement, and it would become a source of considerable pride and unity to both communities.

blend mixes with extraordinary precision. "In Siano's hands, the transitions between songs were no longer the herky-jerky, sputtering, awkward dance floor moments (like trying to change gears without using the clutch) they used to be. They were now taut, well-defined, and smooth — like the ideal physique on the dance floor."

Other crucial developments included the 12-inch single, which was easier for DJs to handle, and wore out less quickly than a 45-inch; and the use of sub-bass. Up until 1976, bass tones below a frequency of 60 hertz were taken out in the process of mastering a record,

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (MAIN); BEE GEE'S, DONNA SUMMER RECORD



TOP: DISCO DJS AT A CLUB IN NEW YORK CITY IN 1977  
ABOVE: DONNA SUMMER'S 1979 VINYL SINGLE, "HOT STUFF"



Along the way, she feels now, disco got bad press. "The subject matter generally was fun, until people started bringing in all this sex stuff — and started associating drugs with it," she says. This was in no ways exclusive to the genre. "They sang jazz in opium dens, but nobody associates opium with jazz. For some reason, disco music got associated with half-naked clothing and over-indulgence on drugs and alcohol."

Somewhat bizarrely, disco has its roots in Nazi-occupied Paris in World War Two. Discotheque is a portmanteau of two French words, *disque*

for record and *bibliothèque* for library. But ultimately, the genre we know came of age in New York. Disco historians (yes, they exist), credit a few DJs with getting the genre underway. One is Francis Grasso, who according to Shapiro "set in motion the notion that a good DJ was a gifted musician in his or her own right, and that a turntable and a mixer were his or her instruments."

### DISCO'S BEGINNINGS

Grasso is generally credited as being the first DJ to beat mix, sonically overlapping two records so that their drum beats

are synchronized, and to use the slip-cueing technique, whereby one record, about to be cued, is held in place while the turntable underneath spins, so that the record can be started exactly when the DJ wants.

Another key figure was Nicky Siano. "If Francis Grasso was the Chuck Berry of the turntables, Siano was the Jimi Hendrix," writes Shapiro. In dextrous fashion, Siano would play on three turntables, while controlling the club's lights with foot pedals; and is credited with the first use of vari-speed turntables in club DJing. According to the disco historian, he is also known for his ability to



It's also true to say that although disco lyrics were frequently ridiculous, many of them also had something to say. There is something primal and powerful about Sister Sledge proclaiming: "We Are Family." And consider "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now", a disco staple recorded by McFadden & Whitehead. While on the face of it, the track feels as cheery as any, a closer listen betrays a strong well of resistance. "If you've ever been held down before / I know you refuse to be held down anymore."

Disco did have something to say, even if it did so very simply. In many ways, this made it everyone's music. The *Billboard* writer Radcliffe Joe wrote in the mid-1970s, "Disco, unlike many other entertainment mediums, has exhibited an extraordinary ability to bring together people of varying colours, races, ideologies, sexual preferences and social financial levels, in an ecumenical dialogue of music and dance which transcends many of the limitations of petty everyday prejudices."

One of the principle interviewees in Shapiro's book

## SOME DISCOS BEGAN TO OPEN AT LUNCHTIME, TO ALLOW WORKERS A BOOGIE IN THEIR LUNCHBREAK. AND THERE WERE DISCO BREAKFAST CLUBS

is Nile Rodgers, the legendary guitarist who started out in life as a touring guitarist with the Sesame Street band, and is best remembered for founding the band Chic. Rodgers has a sense of humour about his rise to disco fame. He recalls that their biggest hit, "Le Freak", which sold seven million copies and was for many years the biggest selling single in Warner Music Group's history, came about



ACTRESS AND SINGER GRACE JONES SMILES WHILE PARTYING AT NIGHTCLUB STUDIO 54 IN NEW YORK IN 1978

because he and co-founder Bernard Edwards were refused entry to a nightclub one New Years Eve, went home, got drunk and set about shouting "F...k off", set to funky music, later sobering up and realising they had accidentally written a really good song. The refrain was softened to "Freak off", and evolved to "Freak out." A huge hit record had been born, almost by mistake.

Rodgers is a great believer that disco mattered, and was politically relevant. He places the music in context, besides the Black Panthers organisation, and the wider Black Power movement. Disco, he argues, came about as a sense of celebration that all of these protest groups — gay power and women's liberation alongside them, plus the end of the Vietnam War — had won. "We were all out there protesting together," he said. The end of the Vietnam War, he notes, "masqueraded as liberation for everybody. So what happens? You celebrate. And that's all that happened. In the middle Seventies, we started celebrating."

One of the best things about disco was that, if Rodgers is right in calling it all a celebration, then people celebrated together. As *Rolling Stone* magazine wrote (before it turned on disco in the late 1970s): "Because it is so democratic — on the boards, the dancer is the ultimate star — disco is probably the most compelling, artful and popular dance movement in generations." It worked for everyone who was prepared to dance, and it still does.

"The dance floor is nothing if not communal, and this group body was a polymorphous, polyracial, polysexual mass affirming its bonds in a space that was out of reach of the tentacles of the church, state or family," writes Shapiro. Or disco's message was: your *real* family is here on the dancefloor.

Before long, it was also everywhere. Disco music was played during the inaugural ball for President Jimmy Carter in January 1977, surely the only inauguration to feature two disco dancers in peanut costumes. In New York, some

discos began to open at lunchtime, to allow workers a boogie in their lunchbreak. And there were disco breakfast clubs, for people who'd danced through the night to keep the beat alive.

Setting up discos was so incredibly easy, all you needed was an empty space and a sound system. In decaying New York, there was a lot of empty industrial space in former factories and warehouses. Disco arose partly as a function of this decay, but it also breathed new life into the inner city.

### BEEN KICKED AROUND

The high point of disco's exposure was likely the movie *Saturday Night Fever*, a film which illustrates the tension between disco's earthy roots and the sense of flamboyance it came to embody. Just try wearing the disco outfit that John Travolta's character Tony Manero wears in that movie — white suit and waistcoat over a black shirt with vast collars. It's best remembered in combination with Travolta's strutting pose, right hand pointing high in the air, pelvis back, chest out. We're not ashamed to admit, *DCM* tried it on recently. Wandering around in a suit like that, it suddenly feels *good* to be ridiculous. You strike poses on the dancefloor with self-deprecating irony, sure, but you step out of yourself that bit more, aided by the now iconic Bee Gees soundtrack, whose high falsetto voices add to the brief throwaway thrill of it all.

But what everybody forgets is that *Saturday Night Fever* is also a gritty, sometimes downright nasty film. Manero lives a miserable, dead-end life in Brooklyn, living with his parents and working in a hardware store. The point of disco in the movie is that it provides his only sense of escape from this drudgery. High voices aside, as the Brothers Gibb note in "Stayin' Alive", he uses his walk, and his over-confident womanising persona, because "I've been kicked around since I was born."

There are gang fights in the movie. There are numerous layers of racism. A woman

## THE CASE AGAINST DISCO

### PLATFORM SHOES

FLASHY, GARISH, DANGEROUS, AND FREQUENTLY WORN BY BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, WE CAN ONLY GUESS HOW MANY TWISTED ANKLES THEY WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR ON THE DANGEROUS DANCEFLOOR



### DISCO STU

POSSIBLY THE MOST ONE-NOTE AND POINTLESS CHARACTER *THE SIMPSONS* EVER INTRODUCED, HE ALSO WORE WATER-FILLED PLATFORM SHOES (CONTAINING TWO LONG-DEAD GOLDFISH). BUT HEY, AT LEAST IN RESEARCHING THIS STORY WE FOUND OUT DISCO STU'S FULL NAME: DISCOTHEQUE STUART.

### ALL STYLE, NO SUBSTANCE?

MARK MOTHERSBAUGH, CO-FOUNDER OF THE NEW WAVE ROCK BAND, WAS ONE OF MANY MUSICIANS WHO FOUGHT AGAINST DISCO. IN AN AGE BEFORE POLITICAL CORRECTNESS, HE COMPARED THE GENRE TO "A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN WITH A GREAT BODY AND NO BRAINS"

### XANADU

YOU'VE HEARD OF THE GOLDEN RASPBERRY AWARDS, WHICH "HONOUR" THE WORST MOVIES OF THE YEAR? THEIR CREATION CAN BE TRACED BACK TO A SINGLE MOVIE — 1980'S *XANADU*, A ROLLER DISCO ROMANTIC MUSICAL STARRING OLIVIA NEWTON-JOHN. ONE REVIEWER SUMMED UP THE TRAINWRECK OF A FILM BY SIGHING, "IN A WORD: XANA-DON'T."



## THE VERDICT



### LOVE TO LOVE YOU BABY

SURE, YOUR BRAIN CAN HATE THE GLITZ, THE APPARENT EMPTINESS, THE FASHION THAT HAS DATED BEYOND BELIEF... UNTIL YOU PUT ON CHIC'S *LE FREAK*. AND THEN SUDDENLY YOUR BRAIN STOPS CARING

AND YOUR HIPS START DARING. FOR BRINGING MILLIONS OF FRUMPY, WOULD-BE NON-DANCERS TO THE DANCEFLOOR — PARTICULARLY AT WEDDINGS — WE WILL ALWAYS BE VERY GRATEFUL. THANKS, DISCO!



is raped. Manero's friend, alienated and depressed, falls to his death from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Nile Rodgers, in the same interview quoted earlier, says of the soundtrack: "It's easy to say it's superfluous because it's disco, but that's just not true. Those songs are powerful: they tell a story." Rodgers suggests that the Bee Gees' message was just as important and relevant as that of the Sex Pistols.

Yet today, few seem to remember this. No doubt its popularity is partly to blame: by the end of 1978, the soundtrack

sold 30 million copies and had become the biggest-selling record of all time. Even disco purists were uneasy about the movie. For a start, it was all actually based on a lie: an article called "Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night" published in a New York magazine in June 1976 by a newly-arrived British journalist called Nik Cohn, who later admitted the whole thing was fabricated, and based on a friend's experience in Britain.

Moreover, the dancing actually *wasn't* disco, it was Northern Soul, a whole separate genre associated with the

industrial north of England. Northern Soul spoke more about the individualist moves that Travolta characterised in the movie. Disco, instead, was more communal — a huge body of people moving together.

As disco became vastly influential, in doing so, it began to implode. By the late 1970s, roller disco had arrived, with its own particular uniform of boob tubes and hot pants, legwarmers and glowsticks, along with a host of unspeakably dismal roller disco movies. The craze was swiftly followed by the Village People.

By this point in his book, Shapiro is entertainingly angry. "There was no aspect of disco culture that was more ludicrous than roller disco," he writes. "Inevitably, many of disco's early devotees hated roller disco and everything that it represented." If roller disco was the genre's embarrassing cousin, the Village People represented its death-knell, he says. "The Village People represented everything naff about disco: the stale beats seemingly phoned in by studio hacks, the dunderheaded English-as-a-foreign language lyrics,

the complete lack of subtlety, all delivered by guys wearing a Native American headdress and a loin cloth, a construction worker's uniform and leather biker gear."

The Village People, Shapiro points out, were loathed by the gay community they might be mistaken to represent. Instead, he says, they got most of their play at aerobics classes for senior citizens, barbecues thrown by car mechanics, and in children's playgroups.

Soon, saturated and very distant from its roots, disco had become tedious and a long

way from cool. By the end of the 1970s, writes Shapiro, the music felt very different. "Disco wasn't getting swept off your feet by John Travolta. It was hearing 'YMCA' six times in one night at the Rainbow Room of the Holiday Inn in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, while doing line dances with a bunch of travelling salesmen. Outside of its original contexts, disco was anything but what it promised, and it was this stupefying mundanity that finally punctured disco's veneer of splendour and dazzle."

An unlikely document of the time is the 1980 classic movie *Airplane!* There is a scene where a city skyline is shown with a radio tower and a neon-lit call sign. A DJ voiceover is heard: "WZAZ in Chicago, where disco lives forever!" Then the plane cuts the tower in half with its wing and the voiceover goes silent. In those days, you just knew the audience was rooting for the plane.

**"DISCO BY NOW WASN'T GETTING SWEEPED OFF YOUR FEET BY JOHN TRAVOLTA, IT WAS HEARING 'YMCA' SIX TIMES AT THE RAINBOW ROOM OF THE HOLIDAY INN WITH A BUNCH OF TRAVELLING SALESMEN"**

Before long, scenes like the mass demolition in Chicago were almost commonplace. A group called DREAD (Detroit Rockers Engaged in the Abolition of Disco) was created. Members had to swear to never wear platform shoes. Their logo was a meat cleaver smashing a record, with the inscription "Saturday Night Cleaver" below it. "Shoot the Bee Gees" T-shirts did a roaring trade. Like



all movements, disco had come to its natural end just as punk in Britain and the beginnings of hip hop in the US began to offer something newer and more dangerous. What was now the sanitized idiocy of disco quickly faded out. It was over.

#### AFTER THE FLOOD

Gaynor's disco career lasted for some years after "I Will Survive". And in order for it to do so, disco had to do some surviving too. The backlash that began towards the end of 1979 was among the most venomous that has been lobbied against a particular style of music. Gaynor has her theories as to the culprits. "It was middle America saying I don't want my children associated with this stuff — so let's kill it." It is argued that new movements such as punk thrived as an alternative to the political apathy inherent in disco, since disco's lyrics weren't widely associated with social complaint, or pretty much anything besides an amorphous sense of freedom and fun. "Lost in Music", as the song had it.

Not surprisingly, Gaynor's disco albums released in 1980 and 1981 sank without a trace. But she had one major hit song to come: "I Am What I Am" in 1983. It was arguably disco's last rallying call, until its revivals decades later. But it had been good while it lasted, and Gaynor remains adamant that disco

never died, nor ever deserved its bad press. "Music is like money," she says. "It takes on the character of the person who's using it. You can't blame money for murder, just because somebody, for love of money, wants to kill somebody," she reasons. "And you can't blame any of that drugs and alcohol stuff on disco."

But how did it feel, for those few great years, to be, as they used to call her, the Queen of Disco? "It felt great to me, because I'm only thinking of the purity of the music, and how it helps people to have fun and release tension. That's all I was ever thinking about — and the fact that it was embraced by such a variety of people."

She paints a scene to illustrate this: the reunification dinner for a newly united Germany. "They called me. They called for disco music at that event," she says. *DCM* can only respond, wow. "Yeah! They didn't call for jazz. They didn't call for rhythm and blues. They called for disco music."

And did she go? "Yes I did. I sang," she says. "It was awesome. Because there were people there from all the different countries, and all the dignitaries as well. It was great." Why, at this pivotal historical moment, did the rallying call go up for disco? Because it can appeal to anyone? The genre's great survivor is emphatic. "Exactly!"

THE HIGH POINT OF DISCO'S EXPOSURE WAS THE MOVIE *SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER*, STARRING JOHN TRAVOLTA (FAR RIGHT) WITH THE ICONIC SOUNDTRACK FROM THE BEE GEES. FOR MANY, DISCO'S LOW POINT WAS THE VILLAGE PEOPLE'S "STALE BEATS" AND "COMPLETE LACK OF SUBTLETY" ACCORDING TO MUSIC CRITIC PETER SHAPIRO





# I WILL SURVIVE

It is an E major 7<sup>th</sup> that kicks it all off: a hammered E bass with the left hand, and then a dexterous trill up and down the keyboard with the right. It is at once delicate, foreboding and a little bit flirty.



PHOTO: FOTOS INTERNATIONAL/REX FEATURES (COURTESY PHOTOS)

THE SONG "I WILL SURVIVE" RECEIVED THE GRAMMY AWARD FOR BEST DISCO RECORDING IN 1980. IT WAS THE FIRST AND LAST TIME THAT THE CATEGORY APPEARED AT THE AWARDS



More than that, it's a signal. Whether it's at a wedding, while you're driving, or in your own home. To some, it's a signal to celebrate identity or faith. But however you interpret it, you almost certainly will know the introduction to "I Will Survive". "At first I was afraid I was petrified. Kept thinking I could never live without you by my side. But then I spent so many nights thinking how you did me wrong. And I grew strong — and I learned how to get along."

Gloria Gaynor has been recording music for 40 years. She's had multiple hits all over the world and has performed in 75 countries, from Buckingham Palace to the Pyramids. She's recorded disco, gospel, rhythm and blues: yet mention her name, and that's the song most will instantly recall. It is a remarkable journey for a record that began as a B-side.

One of Gaynor's onstage tricks used to involve her cracking a microphone cable like a whip. One of her backing singers would then grab it, and the two would feign a tug of war — through which Gaynor would be pulled back towards centre stage. One day in March 1978, the other singer didn't grasp the cable, sending Gaynor crashing backwards over a monitor. She carried on, only to wake the next morning unable to move, and spending two weeks in traction. Two weeks later, she was in even worse shape, spending the next three months in hospital with a spinal surgery.

The incident had two impacts. One was that it rekindled her faith. The other was, while in this frame of mind, wounded and listening to people tell her she was finished, a writer called Dino Fekaris came to her with a song written by him and producer Freddy Perren. When Fekaris came to the studio for the first time, he'd forgotten to bring the song with him, so Gaynor's first viewing of "I Will Survive" was scrawled on a brown paper bag.

"When I first heard the song I believed, and I do believe, that it was an answer to a prayer," she remembers. "At the time, the record company had said they were not going to renew my contract. I had fallen onstage, and woken up the next morning paralysed from the waist down. And I was in hospital praying and asking God,

'what's going to happen to me to me? Where do I go from here? I was asking for guidance, strategy, instruction.'

When she was called again by the record company, which now boasted a new president, it felt like a sign. That feeling grew when she flew to Los Angeles to record the song. "When I began to speak to the producers, they talked to me about what sort of songs I liked, what kind of subject matter. And they said, 'We believe you are the one we have been waiting for to record this song we wrote a couple of years ago.'"

It is scarcely believable now that "I Will Survive" started as the flipside to a track called "Substitute". Yet Gaynor felt its potential. "I really believed the song was going to be a huge hit and it would be popular for as long as the radio would play it," she says. "I was standing here relating to the song, because of what I was going through, and I thought other people would do the same."

Radio airplay and constant live performance eventually gave the track such a following that Polydor re-published it as a single in 1979. Such is Gaynor's connection to the song, it's easy to forget she didn't write it. "I Will Survive" was one of a number of hits Ferakis wrote or co-wrote for Motown-era stars including The Temptations, Diana Ross and Curtis Mayfield.

**"I REALLY BELIEVED THE SONG WAS GOING TO BE A HUGE HIT AND IT WOULD BE POPULAR FOR AS LONG AS THE RADIO WOULD PLAY IT. I WAS RELATING TO THE SONG, BECAUSE OF WHAT I WAS GOING THROUGH"**

Gaynor knows little of the song's genesis. "I have always thought that Dino had a situation with unrequited love, and him and Freddy wrote the song together, but I honestly don't know."

What we do know is that "I Will Survive" was simultaneously the number one song in five countries at one time, including the USA and the UK. The song, and the *Love Tracks* album it appears on, have sold 14 million copies and won a Grammy Award — the track is now certified multi-platinum in the US, and has been recorded in at least 20 languages.

Ever since the track's appearance in 1978, people have found encouragement from its irrepressible back-to-the-wall lyrics. And while the obvious interpretation is that this is a stubborn rebound from lost or unrequited love, it is remarkable what a range of people found inspiration from the disco anthem. In 2013, a book, *We Will Survive*, compiled accounts by 40 different people, from the mother of an autistic son to an Auschwitz survivor, each explaining what the song still means to them. ●