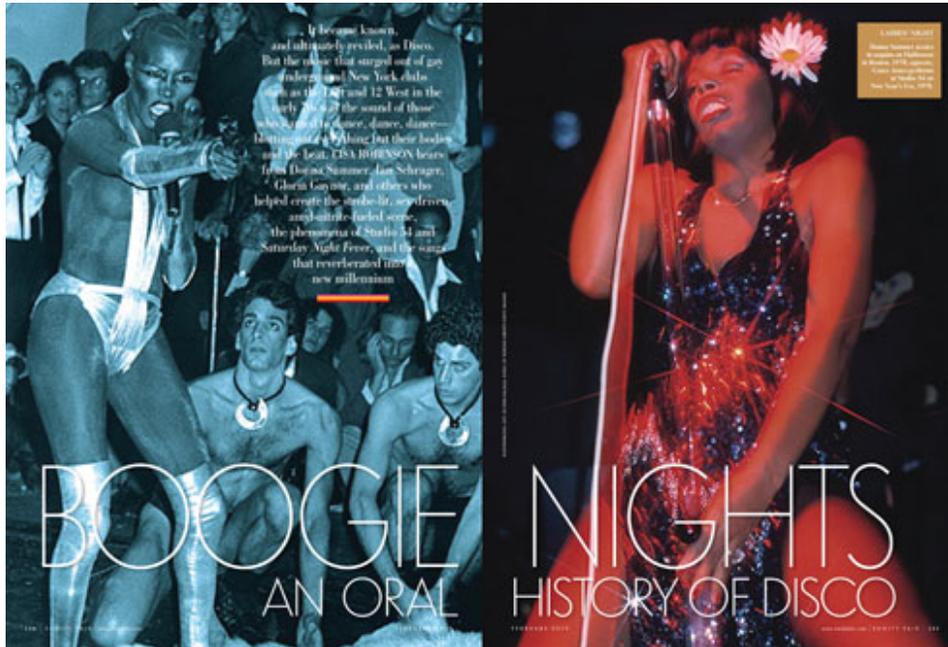


## DISCO INFERNO



Donna Summer sizzles in sequins on Halloween in Boston, 1978. By Ron Galella; opposite, Grace Jones performs at Studio 54 on New Year's Eve, 1978. By Waring Abbott/Getty Images.

## Boogie Nights

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It became known, and ultimately reviled, as Disco. But the music that surged out of gay underground New York clubs such as the Loft and 12 West in the early 70s was the sound of those who wanted to dance, dance, dance—blotting out everything but their bodies and the beat. The author hears from Donna Summer, Ian Schrager, Gloria Gaynor, and others who helped create the strobe-lit, sex-driven, amyl-nitrite-fueled scene, the phenomena of Studio 54 and *Saturday Night Fever*, and the songs that reverberated into a new millennium.

BY LISA ROBINSON  
FEBRUARY 2010

*When we made “Love to Love You Baby,” we knew it was somewhat innovative, but nobody knew people would jump on that bandwagon and all of a sudden the whole world would be going disco.* —Donna Summer

*After Saturday Night Fever, we wanted to do a poster, with the three of us in Rambo's bodies, with machine guns, and in the background there'd be a body in a white suit, bullet-ridden, and the mirror ball all shot to pieces.* —Maurice Gibb, 1987.

*The disco beat was created so that white people could dance.* —Bethann Hardison.

Some say the dance-club scene started in the 1960s in New York City, with discotheques—Regine's, Le Club, Shepheard's, Cheetah, Ondine, and Arthur, which was opened by Sybil Burton after Richard Burton left her for Elizabeth Taylor. Arthur—named after George Harrison's quip in *A Hard Day's Night* (“What would you call that hairstyle?” “Arthur”)—featured D.J. Terry Noel, who may have been the first person to play two records simultaneously to

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create a mix. Arthur drew the same celebrity crowd that had been slumming at the Peppermint Lounge, a hustler bar off Times Square, where Judy Garland and Jackie Kennedy did the Twist with dance instructor “Killer” Joe Piro.



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Some say the 1960s Parisian club scene—Chez Castel, Chez Régine—started it all. These were sophisticated spots where, by the end of the decade, one heard such erotic songs as Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin’s steamy duet “Je T’Aime ... Moi Non Plus” and Isaac Hayes’s dreamy, 12-*minute* version of “Walk On By.” But most agree that none of this really mattered until the early 1970s, when gay underground dance clubs in New York—the Loft, Tenth Floor, 12 West, Infinity, Flamingo, and, later, the Paradise Garage, Le Jardin, and the Saint—spawned a disco culture that brought with it open drug use, on-site sex, and ecstatic, nonstop, all-night dancing.

No one who was there then and is still here now remembers it the same way. The clubs, the music—the experience is recalled in an almost psychedelic haze. Flashing strobe lights, amyl nitrite, quaaludes, swirling sweating bodies, and a pulsating, four-to-the-floor (*boom-boom-boom-boom*) high-energy rhythm—all energized by the music that became known as disco.

*Disco music is funk with a bow tie.* —Fred Wesley, James Brown’s trombonist.

**Nile Rodgers, songwriter, guitarist, producer, co-founder—with bassist Bernard Edwards—of Chic (“Le Freak,” “Good Times”):** Bernard and I were typical R&B and funk musicians, and we knew that if we could get people on the dance floor we could get a record deal. It was exactly that calculated.

**Vince Aletti, disco columnist, Record World, 1974–78; author, The Disco Files:** The Loft was the first club that I remember having this kind of blend of music. It was literally David Mancuso’s loft on lower Broadway. It was a party, it was private, it was all night, and it was only open one night a week. He had a big table of [non-alcoholic] punch, pretzels, fruits ... it was very hippie in a way.

**Judy Weinstein, manager of the Loft; manager of the Record Pool (a D.J. collective); founder, Def Mix Productions:** In 1975, David [Mancuso] moved to 99 Prince Street, so that became the second Loft. SoHo really had nothing to do with anything fashionable, except for the Loft. The original Loft was very gay, with a sprinkling of straights. The Prince Street Loft was more mixed—black and Spanish gay boys, and girls. The white gay boys went to the Tenth Floor. 12 West came later.

**Fran Lebowitz, author (Metropolitan Life, Social Studies):** I remember the Tenth Floor as being one of the best places—maybe because it wasn’t packed, and it didn’t have that commercial feeling that the later clubs had. Or it may just be that I was younger and more impressionable. 12 West was all the way west, and as soon as you got near enough to hear the music, we would start dancing in the street, because it was a mania to dance. It was an appetite. We would dance for hours and hours without stopping. It was so hot in there—it was a very common sight to see boys come out of these clubs and take their T-shirts off and wring them out, and a quart of water would go into the street.

**Bethann Hardison, former model, currently a talent manager and documentarian:** White kids in Philadelphia could dance, they danced on *American Bandstand*, but disco changed the business of music. There’s a big difference between people dancing at parties, or in clubs, to becoming an international *explosion*.

**Felipe Rose, singer, the Indian in the Village People (“Macho Man,” “Y.M.C.A.”):** I danced for money in a notorious after-hours club called the Anvil. I was told that it would be a bunch of guys, [some] naked ... and I couldn’t patronize with the clientele. My hair was long, and being half-American Indian, I was in tribal gear. I’d braid my hair, wear my fringed jacket, the native choker....I was like a small urban myth in the Village.

**Gloria Gaynor, singer (“Honey Bee,” “I Will Survive”):** I was out in the clubs in New York City in 1971, ‘72, feeling the pulse, knowing what was going on. I saw them setting up D.J. booths in closets—taking the top half of the door off, putting in a plank of wood, and that’s what [the D.J.] put his turntable on.

**Bethann Hardison:** For a girl to get into 12 West, you had to be part of a posse who said you were O.K. to get in. I remember the vibe, I don’t remember the people. I could have *married* someone there and not remember their name.

At one point I remember dancing, closing my eyes, and saying, “If I die tomorrow, I’d be fine—because I am so happy.”

**Fran Lebowitz:** You were always afraid to check your coat; you were afraid that the coat-check girl would steal it, and you couldn’t afford to lose a winter coat. There would always be at least one person screaming at the coat-check girl: “Yes, it was a *black* leather jacket!” At the Loft, people would fold their coats and put them on the floor so they could kind of keep an eye on them. Then other people would sit on them, have sex on them.... I was always very concerned about the coat situation. Even thinking about it now, I become anxious.

**Ian Schrager, co-founder with Steve Rubell of Studio 54; C.E.O., Ian Schrager Company:** There were these gay clubs that were more creative, more energetic, more dance-oriented, more tribal, more sexual.

*I want to go where the people dance I want some action ... I want to live.* —“I Love the Nightlife (Disco ‘Round),” Alicia Bridges.

*When record companies realized that a song could break out of the clubs, D.J.’s—David Mancuso at the Loft, Tom Savarese at 12 West, Bobby Guttadaro at Le Jardin, and Richie Kaczor, first at Hollywood, then later Studio 54—had a lot of clout.*

**Vince Aletti:** The D.J.’s became the stars, because the records came and went. There were one-hit wonders, there were major stars, there were records like Manu Dibango’s [Afro-jazz] “Soul Makossa,” but the D.J.’s were the ones who found a way to mix all this very disparate stuff and create a whole evening.

**Gloria Gaynor:** I was doing an up-tempo version of “Never Can Say Goodbye,” and then it became the first disco song to be played on AM radio, and went to No. 1 on the disco charts on *Billboard*.



Disco enthusiasts, 1979. By Sonia Moskowitz.

**Vince Aletti:** Barry White hit in 1974, and that was a major change, because that was a sound that hadn’t been around before. “Love’s Theme” was one of those records that was a huge, huge club record for about six months before it went to a radio station and became No. 1.

*They say that Barry White was the godfather of disco, but Barry White’s sound is a combination of romance, intimacy, educating.... People understand love. In countries where they don’t have record players they buy Barry White’s record, listen to the radio, and stare at the record.* —Barry White, 1987.

**Harry “KC” Wayne Casey, songwriter, founder, KC & the Sunshine Band (“Get Down Tonight,” “That’s the Way [I Like It]”):** I wanted to make an album that would all be up-tempo. “Shake Your Booty” was written out of frustration, seeing people struggling with wanting to have a good time. Wanting to just feel free and be themselves. Get up off your ass and do something.

**Judy Weinstein:** The Record Pool started around 1975 because the record labels got tired of the D.J.’s banging on the doors looking for product. The D.J.’s met at the Loft and said, “Let them send us all the records and we’ll give them feedback.” So if you had a hundred members, you’d get a hundred copies of each record, you’d give them out to the members, and, since some of them were *Billboard* reporters or radio-station D.J.’s, they would play it on-air or write about it.





**Alicia Bridges, singer (“I Love the Nightlife [Disco ‘Round]”):** I noticed that there were several songs in the *Billboard* Top 10 that said “Disco”—“Disco Inferno,” Disco this, Disco that. So we wrote “I Love the Nightlife (Disco ‘Round)”—kind of as a joke. It was a huge hit, but it tied me to the diva, disco title.

Studio 54, 1978. By Allan Tannenbaum/Polaris.

**Felipe Rose:** When Jacques Morali [songwriter and, with Henri Belolo, co-founder of the Village People] first approached me, I couldn’t understand him because his [French] accent was so thick. All I heard him say was he wanted to do something with me, and I said, “No, you’re not.” I saw him again at 12 West, and there were a couple of cowboys and a biker there, and when he saw me with the other characters, his idea for a group crystallized. He said, “We’re going to put a disco group together, a gay disco group.” I didn’t get it, and I thought, Oh great, this is going to go over like an atom bomb.

**Nona Hendryx, singer, Labelle (“Lady Marmalade”):** We were a mixture of rock, funk, R&B, gospel. To us, “Lady Marmalade” was dance music, club music. At that time, though, for a girl group to sing about a prostitute and a john ... well, it wasn’t “Baby Love.”

**Judy Weinstein:** I got the McFadden and Whitehead record “Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now” by mistake, in a box of some other records. I thought it was great, brought it to [influential D.J.] Larry Levan at the [Paradise] Garage, and said, “You’ve got to hear this.” Then Frankie Crocker [D.J. at New York’s WBLS] walked into the club that night, took that record off the turntable, and it became his theme song. That’s how the Record Pool could break a record.



Sarah Dash, Nona Hendryx, and Patti LaBelle in London, 1975. From *RB/RedFerns/Getty Images*.

**Felipe Rose:** Being bi-racial and being gay, I was sort of in the ghetto. Suddenly Jacques is talking about records, and I wasn’t sure the mainstream community was going to get it, and I wasn’t sure how the gay community was going to look at it. But I was an artist and I wanted to just keep working. So I thought, Well, one album and move on to the next thing. Then, when the first album came out, I quit the Anvil.

*Disco music reflected my own personal needs—to be able to listen to music at a dinner party or while making love that wouldn’t be interrupted by a commercial or a radio announcer. When I got Donna Summer’s “Love to Love You Baby,” I played it at a party, and people kept telling me to play it again. So I called [producer] Giorgio [Moroder] and asked him to make an extended version of the record. He made a 16-minute-and-40-second version and the rest is history.* —Neil Bogart, president, Casablanca Records, 1979.

**Giorgio Moroder, songwriter, producer (“Love to Love You Baby,” “I Feel Love”):** I thought if I ever had an idea for a sexy song like “Je T’Aime,” I would like to do it. So I told Donna, if you come up with some lyrics.... One day she came to my studio and said, “I think I have an idea for lyrics,” and she hummed something like “Mmmmmmm ... love to love you baby.” I did a demo, presented it to some people at MIDEM [an international song convention], and the reaction was incredible.

**Donna Summer, singer, songwriter (“Bad Girls,” “She Works Hard for the Money”):** I originally recorded “Love to Love You Baby” on a dare from Giorgio that I couldn’t be sexy. It was a joke that worked. All that orgasmic stuff ... I thought they were kidding—I desperately tried to get them to get someone else to sing the song. Then I made them turn the lights off, get some candles, have some atmosphere. I was going closer and closer to the floor and finally I was lying on the floor. It took a good hour to get me comfortable; I just started singing what came to mind. I was thinking of how Marilyn Monroe would do it.

**Giorgio Moroder:** At first, it didn’t have too much moaning. But on the album [version], she had like 70 [moans].... I think [we did it in] one take.

**Donna Summer:** Giorgio didn’t want me to sing like an R&B singer. I came from church and was used to belting it out. Giorgio wanted me to be international. Then Neil [Bogart] picked it up from there.

**Cecil Holmes, former senior vice president, Casablanca Records:** There was nothing Neil wouldn’t do to promote a record. He was like the P. T. Barnum or the Mike Todd of the record industry. Our problem was how to get such a long song played on the radio. I took it down to WWIN, in Baltimore, to the night show, because on a night show you could do pretty much what you wanted. I told the disc jockeys, “Here’s a record that you can play when you need to go to the bathroom.” They played it all night long.

**Donna Summer:** Being called “the Queen of Disco” ... well, it’s nice to be the queen of *something*.

*There’s a party going on right here A celebration to last throughout the years.* —“Celebration,” Kool & the Gang.

*By 1976, there were reportedly 10,000 discos in the U.S.: discos for kids, for senior citizens, for roller-skaters, and portable discos set up in shopping malls and Holiday Inns. That year, on a regular basis, 5 out of 10 singles on Billboard’s weekly charts were disco. And the Fred Astaire Dance Studios did a brisk business teaching the Hustle.*

**Nona Hendryx:** Some religious people thought we were the reincarnation of the devil because of the line in “Lady Marmalade” “Voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?” Radio stations wouldn’t play it; people came to our shows with placards that said, “We don’t want this music in our town.” But to this day it is a club anthem; we cannot get off the stage without doing it. Still, none of our fans can sing it. They sing, “Voulez-moo coufou mah semah.”

**Felipe Rose:** If the auditions we had for the characters in the Village People were televised, it would have been exactly like *American Idol*. The first day of rehearsal they all said this is going to be so huge, and I still didn’t get it. Then we do the album, go to Europe, and when we came back months later, Jacques would *brazenly parade* us into 12 West and hand the D.J. our record. I felt like a piece of meat. That first album got so huge I had fights in the Village because people went, “Oh, look, he’s a superstar now.” I’m like, “No, I’m not, I’m still the same guy.” So I moved to New Jersey.

**Robert “Kool” Bell, songwriter, bassist, founder, Kool & the Gang (“Celebration,” “Ladies Night”):** Our record company thought we needed a producer to help us come up with a “Soul Makossa” kind of record. We said, “Wait a minute—we can write our own version of ‘Soul Makossa.’” So we went to a studio, rehearsed all day long, and came up with “Hollywood Swinging,” “Jungle Boogie,” and “Funky Stuff.” All in one day. We took that back to the record company, and, well, they didn’t mess with the Gang no more.

**Thelma Houston, singer (“Don’t Leave Me This Way”):** I had been on Motown for five years before I had a hit. Then [Motown executive] Suzanne de Passe found “Don’t Leave Me This Way” on a Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes album, and I loved it. That’s when they really had A&R departments at record companies.

**Evelyn “Champagne” King, singer (“Shame”):** I was 16 years old, in Philadelphia, working with my mom and dad at [Gamble and Huff’s] Sigma Studios, helping out cleaning. I was vacuuming, and [producer] T. Life heard me singing. Two months later I was in his living room listening to “Shame,” and I’ve been on the road ever since. I was a kid, and I had no idea what the lyrics—“Burning, you keep my whole body yearning”—were about. I just went for it.

**Nile Rodgers:** We wrote “Le Freak” because we were denied entry to Studio 54 on New Year’s Eve 1977–78. Grace Jones had invited us to see her show, and she assumed that since our hit “Dance Dance Dance (Yowsah, Yowsah, Yowsah)” was so big we could get in. Normally we could, but it was sold out, she forgot to leave our names at the door,

and [doorman] Marc Benecke wouldn't let us in. He politely told us to fuck off. So Bernard and I went and wrote a song called "Fuck Off": "Awww ... fuck off ... " It sounded great, but I said we can't have a song on the radio called "Aww ... Fuck Off." So I came up with "Freak Off," but that wasn't sexy. Then Bernard came up with "There's that new dance everybody's doing called the Freak." That was our version of "Come on baby, let's do the Twist."



The Village People at the premiere of *Can't Stop the Music*, 1980. By Robin Platzer.

**Gloria Gaynor:** I knew "I Will Survive" was a hit song just from reading the lyrics; I hadn't even heard the melody. But my record company had chosen another song, and this was the B side. So we took it to Richie Kaczor at Studio 54, and he loved it, and played it, and gave it to his D.J. friends. It started getting played in the clubs, and people started calling radio stations wanting to hear it on the radio.

**Felipe Rose:** We were proud of our gay roots, but we rode both sides of the fence very, very cleverly. It wasn't the gays who bought the albums; it was straight girls and boys. Radical gay people said we were a sellout and we should say we're gay and we're proud, but our feeling was we were artists and entertainers first. When you sell a lot of records, you have a responsibility to your business partners. We became the little cute boys who shook their fannies—the disco boy group.

**Gloria Gaynor:** It made all the sense in the world that "I Will Survive" became an anthem of the gay movement. Who felt more oppressed than they did?

**Paul Shaffer, keyboardist; bandleader, The Late Show with David Letterman:** Paul Jabara [Oscar-winning songwriter of "Last Dance"] called me and said he had a song for Donna Summer and he wanted me to help write the music. He said this would appeal to her core audience, which was a gay club audience. "Let's hit the faggots where they live," he said, and of course, as a gay brother, he was entitled to say things like that. He said, "It's called 'It's Raining Men'—what do you think?" And I said, "I'll be right over."

**Martha Wash, singer, Two Tons of Fun, the Weather Girls ("It's Raining Men"):** When I went to audition for [singer] Sylvester, there were two white girls there—thin, blonde—and he turned around and told them they could leave. He asked if I knew anyone as large as I was who could sing. So I brought in Izora Armstead, and we became his backup singers—Two Tons of Fun. He and Izora wore the same-size shoe, so she would break shoes in for him.

**Paul Shaffer:** Paul [Jabara] made a demo of "It's Raining Men," played it for Donna Summer, and she didn't like it. Donna Summer had been born again and she hated when it said "Hallelujah" and "Amen." She thought it was blasphemy. But Paul was undeterred. He knew it was a hit.

**Martha Wash:** Izora and I were at Paul Jabara's house in Los Angeles, and he played us this song—we thought it was a joke. But he said, "No, I want you to record this song." I mean he *begged* us. He said Donna Summer turned it down.

Diana Ross turned it down. Barbra Streisand turned it down. All the other divas turned it down. We finally said, “O.K.,” and the next night we went into the studio and did it in about an hour and a half.

**Felipe Rose:** One day Jacques [Morali] asked us, “Qu’est-ce que c’est Y.M.C.A.?” We thought he was losing his mind, but told him, “Young Men’s Christian Association,” and he said, “Good, we’re going to write a new song, and he went, ‘Young man, da da da da da da ...’” Then when Neil [Bogart] heard it, he said this is the single. We performed “Y.M.C.A.” on TV—the audience did the “Y,” the “M,” the “C,” and the “A” with the hand movements above the head. It sold 3 million copies in a week, 12 million worldwide. It was a juggernaut, it was huge.

*Play that funky music white boy Play that funky music right.* —Wild Cherry

1978–79: Unsurprisingly, rock stars, punk stars, and superstars all started “going disco.” Rod Stewart had the biggest hit of his career with “Da Ya Think I’m Sexy.” The Rolling Stones did an incredible, groove-based song, “Miss You,” that featured a spoken-word breakdown from Mick Jagger (“... some Puerto Rican girls just dyyyyyyinnn’ to meetchoo”). Blondie broke out of CBGB with a chart-topping single, “Heart of Glass.” And Diana Ross collaborated with Chic for “I’m Coming Out.”

I hate “Da Ya Think I’m Sexy,” but I have to do it live because it goes down so well. —Rod Stewart, 1984.

“I’m Coming Out” and “Upside Down” were reflections of what was going on with me at that time. A lot of women identified with that. —Diana Ross, 1996.

**Debbie Harry, singer, Blondie (“Heart of Glass”):** I didn’t feel that [“Heart of Glass”] was so different. It’s really hard to categorize music, because everything is so overlaid with influences. I was always surprised at who was offended. [We heard that] Joan Jett was highly offended that we did [a disco song], and I think the Ramones were, too.

*He wears the finest clothes The best designers heaven knows ...Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci.* —“He’s the Greatest Dancer,” Sister Sledge.

*Studio 54, from opening night on April 26, 1977, until the “going-away party” on February 2, 1980—when owners Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager went to jail for tax evasion—was the greatest dance club ever. It wasn’t “Uptown” meets “Downtown”—it was Midtown, and it drew a mix: rich, not rich, celebrated, not, gay, straight, black, white, Puerto Rican, young, old, male, female, and what used to simply be called drag queens. Marc Benecke and Steve Rubell—wearing a Norma Kamali down coat—were at the door, and those who gained entry felt special. Every night was a party, and there never has been, nor ever will be, any place like it again.*

**Bethann Hardison:** At first, I was angry about Studio 54. I felt that it was going to change real dancing and the dance-music world. The worst thing to me was they served alcohol. I thought, How you gonna get drunk and dance?

**Judy Weinstein:** When Studio 54 opened I thought, I gotta get some clothes.

**Ian Schrager:** Steve was such a lover of people and so genuinely concerned with their feelings and truly got gratification from making them feel comfortable. When we were doing Studio 54, Steve would always ask me, “Do you think people still want to dance?” People have been dancing and doing those tribal things since Sodom and Gomorrah; there are certain things that are part of our species, and those things never change.

**Fran Lebowitz:** People want to dance because people want to have sex. Dancing is sex. That’s why when people say, “I’m a great dancer,” that’s not actually what they mean.

**Bethann Hardison:** [Studio 54] actually changed the world. That’s why you could go to Bosnia or some small, obscure place and there’ll be some fool standing outside someplace with a red velvet rope acting like they’re Steve



Liza Minnelli and Mikhail Baryshnikov at Studio 54, 1977. From Bettmann/Corbis.

Rubell.

*I work on my hair a long time.* —John Travolta as Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever*, 1977.

*Like Rocky before it, or Eminem in 8 Mile 25 years later, Saturday Night Fever was an age-old story of a boy who dreams that his skills will get him out of the neighborhood. Saturday Night Fever, based on a New York magazine article, was accompanied by a soundtrack album that included Bee Gees hits—“Stayin’ Alive,” “Jive Talkin,” “You Should Be Dancing”—and others, such as the Trammps’ “Disco Inferno” and Kool & the Gang’s “Open Sesame.” The album sold 25 million copies; the movie was a phenomenon. It also was the beginning of the end of disco.*

*We wrote those songs in a week. [Our manager] Robert [Stigwood] said he was doing this film and needed songs for it. In those days, it was like “Wow! Movie music!” You would pay people to get your song in a film. We played the songs for him, and he said they were perfect. And they revamped “You Should Be Dancing,” which had been a hit two years earlier, because John [Travolta] liked dancing to it.* —Maurice Gibb, 1987.

**Bill Oakes, former president, RSO (Robert Stigwood Organization) Records; music supervisor, film and soundtrack album, Saturday Night Fever:** Nik Cohn was staying on my couch when he was writing the piece for *New York* magazine. Nik was fascinated by the idea that real music, real dance, was happening in the boroughs, that it was a blue-collar thing.

**Peter Brown, former executive director, Apple Corps; former chief executive, RSO:** The Bee Gees were making their 35th comeback, and Robert was very close to them. He’d been totally responsible for their early success because he had developed them, he had produced them, he’d looked after them, and of course, at the same time, he owned their management, their record label, and their music publishing. So when *Saturday Night Fever* hit, Robert had the movie, their management, their publishing, and their record deal.

**Kevin McCormick, former president of production, Warner Bros. Pictures; former executive in charge of film development, RSO; executive producer, Saturday Night Fever:** I was 26 years old and didn’t really know what I was doing, but Robert told me to find a director for the movie. I sent the article over to an agent who had a director I was interested in, and he said, “Kid, you know what? My clients do movies—they don’t do magazine articles.”



**Bill Oakes:** Nik’s original title was “The Return of Saturday Night,” but we couldn’t call the movie that—it would sound like a sequel. Of course, [*New York* editor] Clay Felker gave it a slightly more pretentious title: “The Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night.”

Giorgio Moroder poolside in Beverly Hills, 1979. From Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images.

**Kevin McCormick:** The movie had such intense verisimilitude. Because it's all angled on the character. This guy worked all day to have that moment....It's a great dramatic story.

**Vince Aletti:** Despite the fact that they were these cheesy white guys, those Bee Gees songs still sound good today. The rest of the album had legitimate songs like "Disco Inferno"; it brought in a lot of people who hadn't heard the more black side of disco.

**Bill Oakes:** I remember being under the El in Brooklyn, they're shooting it, and I thought it all seemed a bit amateurish. It wasn't a big Hollywood movie; it was done out of the back of a truck. My own feeling was that we were too late with the disco angle. I thought that disco had peaked.

**Monti Rock III, singer, Disco Tex in Disco Tex & the Sex-O-Lettes ("Get Dancin'," "I Wanna Dance Wit Choo"); the D.J. in Saturday Night Fever:** My lawyer got me this part in *Saturday Night Fever*, so in my mind I'm going to be in a *movie*. I arrive in Brooklyn with my Louis Vuitton luggage, not a dime in my pocket, and I say, "Where's my trailer?" I had a bit part in the movie, and my name was supposed to be Bernie, but I wanted to be called Monti. So John Travolta, who is the nicest man I ever met in show business, said my name could be Monti. I didn't think that movie would do shit.

**Kevin McCormick:** Travolta had been training for months to do the dance solo, but the way it was being shot was cutting his feet off, and it drove him crazy. So the whole picture shut down, because Travolta absolutely wouldn't work anymore until [director] John Badham agreed to cover the dance solo the way Travolta wanted it covered. You couldn't see just pieces of it and have the same emotional experience. It's the high point of the movie, and Travolta was 100 percent right.

*When we wrote the music, the only songs we thought were disco were "You Should Be Dancing" and maybe "Jive Talkin'." We never thought of "Stayin' Alive" as disco. —Barry Gibb, 1983.*

**Bill Oakes:** We had two No. 1 [hits]—"Stayin' Alive" and "How Deep Is Your Love?"—before the movie even came out. The movie opened in something like 600 theaters, which was unprecedented, and it went through the roof on the opening weekend. The record had sold the movie, and that had never happened before.

**Vince Aletti:** The disco community, whatever that was, felt very ambivalent about [*Saturday Night Fever*]. It brought a lot of attention to disco, it exploded, but once something becomes so big, it has to be over.

*You couldn't turn on the radio without hearing one of our songs. It became an albatross, image-wise. Rather than think of what success it brought to radio and to the record industry and [that it] made everybody a lot of money, the radio programmers made us feel like we inflicted it upon them. —Maurice Gibb, 1987.*

*Last dance, last chance for love Yes it's my last chance for romance tonight. —"Last Dance," Donna Summer.*

*When AIDS first hit the club scene, toward the end of the 70s, no one knew what it was or how you could get it. Some thought you could "catch" it from sweat; others were terrified of the amyl-nitrite "poppers" inhaled to get that extra high while dancing. But the backlash to disco as a contribution to moral decay was intense.*

**Felipe Rose:** Our lives were not complicated, we were carefree. We didn't know what was about to come.

**Martha Wash:** AIDS was scaring everybody. Everything was changing and people were passing on.

**Nona Hendryx:** You could see it in people's faces, and as you lost friends, you didn't have friends to go to the clubs with; the people who made the music started disappearing. The people who were anti-homosexual used that as a "See, I told you ..." It was a way to segregate people.

**Thelma Houston:** The gay community started to come together and become more organized. And it just happened that my song "Don't Leave Me This Way" was happening pretty big at that time. It became a kind of anthem.

*In 1979 in Chicago, after rock station WDAI went all-disco, radio D.J. Steve Dahl rallied people around a "Disco*

*Sucks” movement. On July 12, 1979, he blew up disco records at Comiskey Park between games at a Chicago White Sox doubleheader (the video lives to this day on YouTube).*

**Nile Rodgers:** After the “Disco Sucks” period, in the summer of 1979, there were two No. 1 records: Chic’s “Good Times” and the Knack’s “My Sharona.” The Knack was going to be the savior of rock ‘n’ roll, and for the first time we were sort of ostracized. As great as “My Sharona” was, the Knack never had another hit record again, while “Good Times” got ripped off by Queen, the Clash, INXS, and SugarHill Gang.

**Fran Lebowitz:** There’s music I don’t like, but I don’t make a *career* of not liking it—I just don’t listen to it. “Disco Sucks” was a kind of panic on the part of straight white guys. Disco was basically black music, rock ‘n’ roll was basically white: those guys felt displaced.

**Alicia Bridges:** It was sort of the end of my career, because even though I’m an R&B and rock artist, they didn’t want to hear anything but disco from me.

**Gloria Gaynor:** If you don’t like disco music and you’re burning the records, why have you got them in the first place? This had to be a movement started by somebody who got a mob mentality going and whose livelihood was being affected by the popularity of disco music.

*Dancing helps relieve the pain  
Soothes your mind  
Makes you happy again. —“Everybody Dance,” Chic.*

**Robert “Kool” Bell:** When times are bad, people want to dance their troubles away.

**Fran Lebowitz:** Everyone keeps saying how bad the economy was in the 70s. But people who were young were not going dancing to escape a bad economy. If you had asked me what the economy was, I wouldn’t have had the slightest idea. I knew *I* didn’t have any money, but I didn’t realize it was a citywide problem.

**Ian Schrager:** It wasn’t AIDS that made the nightclub business difficult. Government regulations did it in. Steve and I did our first nightclub [the Enchanted Garden, in Douglaston, Queens] for \$27,000 and Studio 54 we did for \$400,000. Now, with all the regulations, fire codes, sprinkler requirements, neighborhood issues, community planning boards ... before you even put on the first coat of paint, you’re into it for over a million dollars. What it’s done is disenfranchise young people.

**Nona Hendryx:** Where did the dancers go? They went to the gym. It became the new club. That’s where people started meeting people, started hanging out. They were trying to make themselves look healthier and better, they were playing music, they had dance classes.

*Winter 2009–10: The Village People’s “Y.M.C.A.” is played during televised N.B.A. games. A “Disco Ball,” with Gloria Gaynor, the Trammps, Peaches and Herb, Monti Rock III, and others, has been held in Las Vegas and Atlantic City. Last fall, the Hollywood Bowl hosted a huge “Disco Fever 3” show with Chic, Kool & the Gang, the Village People, and Thelma Houston. D.J. “schools” all over the country teach how to mix MP3s for clubs. Cheryl Lynn’s “Got to Be Real” is the soundtrack to an Applebee’s television commercial. The Bee Gees, celebrating their 50th anniversary, appeared on both American Idol and Dancing with the Stars. In December, Donna Summer performed at the Nobel Peace Prize concert in Norway. And despite government regulations and community issues and fire laws and neighborhood complaints, dance clubs are sprouting up again; whether they’re places that get closed down, like the Beatrice Inn or the Jane, in New York City, or private “parties” that pop up with regularity, drawing younger dancers by word of mouth to basement rooms, empty office spaces, or lofts—you can’t stop the music.*

**Gloria Gaynor:** Disco music is alive and well and living in the hearts of music-lovers around the world. It simply changed its name to protect the innocent: Dance music. There’s no better music for a party—it helps you get rid of the stresses of the day.

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