



Madonna performing in Los Angeles in 2006.

Disco and Dance Music

by Joe A. Thomas

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Perhaps no other popular art form is more closely identified with gay culture than disco and dance music. Gay men in particular adopted the intense, loud, throbbing 4/4 beat of dance music that predominated at the bars and discos that were among the few places where they could openly express their sexual identities. As the musical backdrop for generations of gay men who came of age and discovered an entirely new gay world in such venues, dance music became inextricably connected with the gay experience.

While dancing to music has, of course, an extraordinarily long history, the contemporary popular genre known as dance music began with the disco craze of the 1970s. Disco, in turn, found its roots in the memorable beats of black funk and rhythm and blues from the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Early Disco

Disco can perhaps be divided into several phases. Early disco (1970-1975) included early 1970s rhythm and blues hits such as "Rock the Boat" by The Hues Corporation (1973). While eminently danceable, early disco often lacked many of the distinguishing features that would later be associated with disco music, such as the clap track (the sound of clapping hands counting the beat) or the soaring choruses of violins.

The success of the 1974 instrumental hit "Love's Theme" by the Love Unlimited Orchestra (led by rhythm and blues great Barry White) and the novelty song "Do the Hustle" (1975) by veteran performer Van McCoy signaled the arrival of a new sound, smooth and frothy, just perfect for the mid-1970s revival of elaborate dance steps. In fact, one of the primary characteristics of disco was just how often the songs themselves were about dancing.

High Disco

High disco (1976-1980) is the sound most often associated with disco by the general public. It reached something of a climax with the film *Saturday Night Fever* in 1977 and its sidetrack full of hits by the Bee Gees (which remains among the best-selling albums of all time). That same year saw the opening of a virtual temple to the disco lifestyle, Studio 54, where gays and straights of all ethnicities danced to the music that had been born in black and gay clubs a few years previously.

For gay audiences the undisputed queen of disco during these years was Donna Summer. From the highly sexualized moans and groans of "Love to Love You Baby" in 1976 to "On the Radio" in 1980, Summer (in collaboration with the Swiss composer Giorgio Moroder, who pioneered the use of electronic music in disco as well as the extended re-mix) had a string of number-one hits that made her name synonymous with disco and herself much adored by gay fans.

Post-classic Disco

During disco's post-classic period (1980-1982), its earlier momentum slowed in the face of increasingly

violent negative reactions on the part of its foes, who saw disco as shallow, effete, and to a great extent, too queer. Post-classic disco thus went largely undercover and was heard primarily in gay clubs. It nevertheless saw the creation of club hits such as Sharon Redd's "In the Name of Love" (1982).

In the 1980s disco's detractors celebrated what they deemed "the death of disco"; however, disco did not die. Instead, it became absorbed into the broader realm of popular music in the context of the arrival of New Wave and Punk Rock.

Dance Music

By the 1990s, Disco had already returned as a new genre with a new name: dance music. Its survival and triumphant re-emergence was ensured by 1980s performers such as Madonna, whose 1983 release "Burning Up" combined a New Wave techno sound with the traditional disco beat; the twelve-inch single, long-play version was a staple in gay bars, and Madonna soon became a gay icon for the 1980s and beyond.

As dance music continued to evolve, by the twenty-first century it split into innumerable sub-genres: house, trance, hypno, jungle, and many other subtle combinations and variations. Electronically produced, digitally manipulated sounds predominated. Disc Jockeys became celebrities in the 1990s, selling mixes and re-mixes of dance songs that were bought not for the vocalists or performers, but for the mixing talents of the DJs.

And throughout its complex evolution gays remained the most loyal fans of disco and dance music.

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About the Author

Joe A. Thomas is Associate Professor and Chair of the Art Department at Clarion University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses primarily on issues of sexuality and representation, but also digresses into American Pop Art and Italian Mannerism.