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BLAME IT ON THE BOOGIE: THE STORY OF THE RISE AND FALL OF DISCO

Devin Hudson

Introduction

This project originated on a trip to Atlanta for a surprise birthday party. I had been placed in charge of the music and decided to put on some old-school songs. “Somebody Else’s Guy” by Joycelyn Brown played and created a new interest in me.ⁱ I decided to go and check the genre of the song and discovered that it belonged to Post-disco. I became intrigued because I had never heard of Post-disco. Upon doing further research I learned that Post-disco was used to describe a period of American music that started with an event dubbed as “Disco Demolition Night,” which occurred on July 12, 1979 at Comiskey Park in Chicago, Illinois.ⁱⁱ Disco Demolition Night is known as the culmination of Disco hate. Opponents of the genre hated Disco because of its over-commercialization and how it represented the mass liberation of Blacks, Latinos, gays and women. I found that this characterization does not match the literal definition of Disco, which means that this is a mislabeling. This paper shows how the assigned labels placed on Disco along with its over-commercialization led to increased Disco hate and Disco Demolition Night and only serves as glimpse of the rise and fall of Disco in the 1970’s.

Post-disco is also referred to as “boogie”. Boogie has been used to describe a style of dance. The title of this paper originated from a song performed by The Jackson 5, “Blame It On The Boogie,” released in 1978. I use this title as a double entendre because the song is listed in the Disco genre, but I also use the title to emphasize the power that Disco had socially. Lead singer Michael Jackson laments the strain that Disco has put on his relationship.ⁱⁱⁱ Boogie is proving to be much too strong for Jackson to compete with, leaving Jackson to place the blame on the art form.

“Disco” in its capitalized form intends to refer to a broader meaning, including the genre, era and the message. “Disco” in lowercase refers to a tangible definition, such as a building or a record.

Blame it on the Boogie

Fans and opposers mislabeling Disco, along with the over-commercialization of the genre, led to increased hate, culminating in the event known as “Disco Demolition Night.” Disco represented the mass liberation of gays, Blacks, Latinos and women.^{iv} The Disco era became a utopia for these social pariahs.

The word “disco” derives from the word “discothèque,” a French word used to describe the nightclubs scene in Europe. “Discothèque dress” became used in 1964 to describe a popular short sleeve dress in America.^v The word was then shortened to “disco” when an April edition of Playboy magazine began to cover the fashion trend, giving birth to a genre and, subsequently, a new culture.^{vi}

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Producers had become plastic surgeons for vinyl bodies.

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Although Disco did not set out to attract any particular groups, except regular partygoers, gay people were a regular and increasing population at these clubs. The aura complimented all of their physical and emotional desires, and welcomed them in on a nightly basis. In general, clubs allow individuals to remove their daily baggage and slip into a groove, free of greater responsibility. Disco allowed

gay people to do this at a more sufficient rate. While most gay individuals felt required to mask their sexuality in their everyday lives, they were now in a space that promoted and fed off it. The challenge became being more gay than the next person. Perhaps if you were not gay enough, you could be rejected from entering the club, ending your night before it could even get started. This was certainly the case at clubs like the Loft and Studio 54, the two most popular discothèques in New York.^{vii}

An important development in the gay liberation movement came June 17, 1969, nearly ten years before Disco Demolition Night. It was customary for the police to make monetary arrangements with mob bosses, allowing club owners to conduct business, despite city ordinances and statutes. It was illegal for men to dance with other men.^{viii} It was also illegal for clubs and bars to sell alcoholic drinks to homosexuals, but that measure had been overruled by law enforcement.^{ix} New York's finest would allow the bending of these rules as long as they received the necessary paperwork—green paperwork adorned with president faces. A missed payment resulted in the raid of the Stonewall Inn disco club that evening in June.^x Although officers may have thought the raid would stymie the growth of Disco, the opposite occurred. Disco was spreading fast, and it was only the beginning. When one disco would succumb to extinction, another would open its arms, welcoming in the “limp wrist,”^{xi} a slang term used to codify flamboyant homosexuals.

Leaving behind low-tier discos did not come without penalty. Disco was becoming more commercial by the minute, and as gay grew, so did Disco. As mentioned earlier, being gay enough got you into the club, but this was about to change. Disco was receiving a facelift. Heterosexual guests began to experience Disco, removing the exclusivity that was common in most clubs. Many wanted to enjoy a good time, with good



Grace Jones, a regular at the most popular disco club, Studio 54 in New York. Courtesy of NY Daily News.

music and good people. However, they did not come dressed in familiar disco attire. They arrived well-groomed and in vibrant, tailored suits. They showed up to even more elaborate decorations. Large disco balls hung from the ceiling, and expensive lights were scattered about the club. It was becoming more apparent that the game was changing, and one would need to change with it. Participants were beginning to notice the growth of gay and discos and were excited by it.^{xii}

Disco, by now, was in full swing. There was the scene and the vibe that attracted gay people, along with the music that attracted other minorities, namely Blacks and Latinos. Black people, historically, have been given the arduous task of navigating life under uncomfortable circumstances.

Beginning with their arrival in North America in the early 1600s, through the modern civil rights movement of the 1960s, and continuing with present-day brutality at the hands of police, discrimination has been a dominant theme in the journey of African-Americans. Yet, Blacks have still managed to find a way for themselves, especially socially and artistically. During the 1960s, protest songs dominated the air waves, thus defining the civil rights movement. Black people collectively closed their eyes and hoped with Sam Cooke as he envisioned and promised change through song.^{xiii} Another example of Black musical liberation can be found in James Brown creating a five-minute Black power testimonial in 1968, announcing the power and prestige of his race.^{xiv} Almost anyone, regardless of race or sex, could exist within Disco. Demonstrative protest was the thing then, but Disco was a different song. The party moved from the streets to the clubs.



Radio DJ Steve Dahl standing next to a large box of disco records on Disco Demolition Night. Courtesy of *The Guardian*.

Many discos intended to stay authentic, providing an outlet for an energetic and rhythmic population. Promoters and owners would still do much of the leg work for their venues, creating the most socially accepting environment possible.^{xv} However, the DJ's did not find the same fortune. Their success became dependent on the crowd's enjoyment. This

meant updated equipment, which was met with updated prices. Some discos failed to meet this expectation and found themselves shutting down.^{xvi} Others adapted and created new atmospheres for their guests. Song selection became the single most important factor to the success of a disco. Practically all discos consisted of public sex and drugs, but the music is what drove the moment. The DJ assumed the responsibility of keeping people on the dance floor, but they needed help, and help they did receive. A shift was beginning in the music industry. Instead of the common three-minute records listeners were accustomed to hearing on the radios, music label executives came upon an interesting discovery—the longer the song plays, the longer a person is able to dance to it. Donna Summer was already the most popular female disco artist of the era and her seventeen-minute orgasm only helped to maintain her elite status.^{xvii} Even R&B and Soul singer Marvin Gaye, at the request of his music label, created a twelve-minute disco record, which became a number one hit in 1977.^{xviii} Gaye's song was a response to "Disco Lady" by Johnnie Taylor, the first song ever certified platinum by the RIAA [Recording Industry of Association of America], as well as the first song to ever top Billboard Hot 100 charts with "disco" in its title.^{xix} Although not nearly long as the hits by Gaye and Summer, just having any mention of disco certainly helped the popularity of Taylor's song, furthering the power and reach of the genre. Needless to say, if you did not have a hit on Billboard, you did not have what labels were looking for. Music executives began a race to pump out the next great hit that would load their pockets. The over-commercialization of Disco was on its way, and the repercussions were behind it.

The mass liberation of gays, Blacks and Latinos cannot be summed up with one song. One could make a case, however, that "I Will Survive," performed by Gloria Gaynor, offers a strong summation concerning the message of the movement. The eight-minute declaration holds power that all

minorities could identify and cling to.^{xx} The song was hailed for its minimal production, representative of the early stages of Disco. Many Disco songs of the 1970s were dominated by heavy production, background singers and pitched vocals—features that were added to ensure financial gain. In fact, Disco had come to a point where the singer was no longer the focal point. The average artist could become a star if paired with the right production team.^{xxi} Producers had become plastic surgeons for vinyl bodies. It was this factor that could be looked at as a contributing factor to Disco hate. Not only did adjacent outsiders assign messages to disco, but the message was also being misconstrued and its messengers misused. Liberation was all about freedom, creativity and expression. It is ironic, then, that liberation through Disco was being controlled on multiple fronts—fashion, music and message.

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The look of Disco soon followed, going from weirdo to wealthy.

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In many ways, Disco had become dependent. In the beginning, it depended on the DJ. The DJ was more important than the bartender, doorman and even the club owner. The aesthetic of Disco soon followed, going from weirdo to wealthy. This dependency then shifted to record label executives and producers. Their ability to create a hit while creating stars in the process became a prominent feature for the genre. The one thing that never changed was the presence of minorities—the originators of Disco. They never went away; they just became outnumbered, battling more competing forces than any of them could foresee. With Disco seemingly on its last leg, an opposing genre was coming to demolish the sound for good.



The scene from Comiskey Park on Chicago, July 12th, 1979. Signs reading “Disco Sucks” hang in the background. Courtesy of Detroit Free Press.

For a while, Rock and Disco existed together, but in two totally different spaces. Disco was not just gayer rock. Disco had its own personality. As dependency brought Disco down, Rock set out to finish the job. After all, there can only be one majority, which means the minority will always lose. In 1978, radio DJ Steve Dahl existed to represent that majority. Dahl accepted a job in Detroit as radio DJ for the city’s rock station, but was fired when the station switched from Rock to Disco.^{xxii} Dahl eventually found work in radio again and latched on to the dependency of Disco. Dahl attacked Disco for its failure to sustain a genuine, authentic product.^{xxiii} Routine rants and parodies followed Dahl’s initial disapproval. Rock DJ’s were ready to finish off Disco when the opportunity presented itself, joining Dahl’s “Disco sucks” campaign. The only thing left for Disco was a public funeral.

July 12, 1979 marked the end of Disco and the beginning of Post-disco. Comiskey Park, home of the Chicago White Sox, hosted Disco’s demolition. In a joint effort with White Sox owner Bill Veeck and his son Mike Veeck, Dahl and his anti-disco army, The Insane Coho Lips,^{xxiv} hosted “Disco Demolition Night” between a double-header, featuring the White Sox versus the Detroit Tigers.^{xxv} Combined with “Disco Demolition Night” was “Teen Night.” Fans—as well as non-

fans— could be admitted into the game for just ninety-eight cents, as long as they brought a Disco record to blow up during the game. Teens showed up in mass numbers, and many brought more than one record, making their Disco hatred obvious. The event exceeded capacity instantly.^{xxvi} After the Tigers won the first game,^{xxvii} Dahl took to the field sporting military gear and ready to commence the destruction. This war would be completely one sided. Dahl engaged the crowd in song before detonating the massive stack of Disco records. Spectators became so enamored with the spectacle that they decided to take the demonstration to the next level. Thousands from the sellout crowd, full of beer and marijuana, converged onto the field to complete Disco's demise, trashing the outfield and delaying the game. The event was so powerful that the second game of the double-header was canceled and later forfeited by the White Sox, as

officials deemed the playing field unplayable.

"Straight, middle-class people never learned how to party."^{xxviii} Perhaps partying was not something you learned to do, more than it was something that you experienced. For gays, Blacks, Latinos and women, partying came naturally; thus, Disco came naturally. Disco, to them, was the frustration, oppression and hatred felt elsewhere in life being released artistically for hours upon hours, in a way they knew best. "But for us, partying is release, celebration." The more hostile vibes in your life, the better you learn how to party, "cause that's your salvation."^{xxix} Disco Demolition Night did not happen because Disco existed. Disco Demolition Night happened because the release had been realized by participants and identified by opposers.

ENDNOTES

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